

- Size + Dark

Red Phantom

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Tommy's death was a tragedy, but it hurt no one more than Sam, the warden who believed that he could have saved him – yet there's only so much he can do when the boy's murderer is already under lock and key. And Dream, far from fazed by the blood on his hands, continues to taunt the world outside his cell with the dark knowledge no one believes he possesses. Sam believes he may be telling the truth, for once, but bending to his prisoner's wishes is definitely not a path he's ready to go down. **Not yet, at least.** Through all of this, more trials and tribulations start to arise. They involve, among others, the likes of Ranboo, a sweet but forgetful enderman hybrid with a memory book that might bring about more trouble than he thinks, Captain Puffy, a washed-up sea captain whose fight against a mess of demonic tendrils leads to more conflicts and turmoil, and a silent phantom who only wants one thing: peace.

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Prologue: The Warden's Prelude, or "The Death Of A Hero"

[TRIGGER WARNINGS FOR THE ENTIRE STORY]

Blood, gore, abuse, manipulation, abandonment, grief, mourning, deaths of minors and adults, alcohol, slightly lewd or suggestive comments (Schlatt's doing, mostly), smism, violence, blackmail, attempted murder, scars, blades, guns, injuries sustained through multiple different ways (burning, weapons...) If you are uncomfortable with any of these themes or mentions, then I would suggest clicking out now. Take care of yourself, talk to someone if you need to (my DMs are always open) and come back when you feel better. ❤️

The characters described in this story are obviously the fictional characters played in the SMP or fictional representations of the CCs, and not the actual content creators themselves. That said, if by any chance any CCs

involved in this story (ie: Awesamdude, Captain Puffy, TommyInnit, Ranboo, Tubbo, BadBoyHalo, Antfrost, Dream etc.) want this to be taken down for one reason or another, I will comply willingly.

"Sam! Sam!"

The calls of his name echoed down the vast, empty halls of the prison, scraping against the blackstone and bouncing off the obsidian like icy blasts of sharp wind.

Sam, the Warden of Pandora's Vault, took a deep breath, head ringing from the ceaseless barrage of Dream's repeated shouts. They had been going on and on for the past ten minutes now with no reprieve. It was both an impressive show of resilience by the caller, and a head-splitting curse for the one who had to bear the cries for gods know how many more hours.

He dragged his fingers along the rough obsidian walls and continued his investigation. With the sheer amount of explosions that had occurred, something should have been damaged. There should have been something that could have been used as a clue, even as small as a chipped corner, but there was nothing at all. There wasn't a single scratch on any of the defensive layers of the Vault, inside or out.

Despite it all, it was nice to see that the prison was indeed as impenetrable as it was meant to be.

Sam withdrew his hands, and jotted down a few lines in his notebook.

It was 11:39 AM.

He frowned and huffed under the gas-mask that covered the lower half of his face. It eerily amplified his breath whenever he spoke or even sighed. He hated how far he was from figuring out who had caused the security issue, and why. The longer he took to find the culprit, the longer Tommy had to be locked up with Dream in the main cell. That was something he couldn't disregard.

He had talked to them both briefly a while ago. Dream didn't have much to say, but oh boy Tommy certainly did. Despite his overwhelming worry for the boy, Sam had been somewhat humoured to find that *Dream* was the one slowly going insane from being trapped with Tommy. That said, both of them were eagerly demanding to know when Tommy would be allowed to leave. Sam unfortunately couldn't give them a clear answer.

"Sam! I've been trapped in here for over a week!" Tommy had yelled to him from the other side of the lava curtain, whining desperation plaguing his voice. "Over a week! The contract I signed said a week was the maximum! Let me go!"

"Tommy, I'm sorry. You're going to have to stay in there a bit longer," the warden had replied.

"Stay in here? With Dream? Sam, I'm begging you, let me out! This is worse than exile—"

"Be strong. It won't be for much longer, I promise!"

"I'm getting claustrophobic in here, I'm going batshit insane, I'm—"

Sam clearly remembered the way his hand had gripped his trident tighter. He could clearly picture the fear and despair in the boy's eyes. It had hurt him just to imagine it, but even then he couldn't break prison protocol. It was there for a reason. Who knows how many more lives would be at risk if he did?

"Sam? Are you still there? Please, Sam! Sam, Sam, Sam—"

"Tommy, I can't let you out until I've solved the issue! Just hang on, alright?"

"Sam—"

"I promised I'd keep you safe," Sam had reminded him sternly. "I intend to keep my word. All you need to do is hang in there for a while more. Can you do that for me?"

"But—"

"Tommy, please." He was exhausted and stressed enough already. He couldn't take anything more just now.

A moment passed. "Okay."

"Just give me another hour or two. As soon as I've found something, I'll come and get you, alright?"

"Promise?"

"I promise, Tommy."

"And you're going to keep it, right?"

"I always do."

That had been a few hours ago now. Sam has still found nothing at all but he had insisted on continuing to search regardless. As he had promised, he'd go get the boy when he had found a clue. As of now, he had still found nothing at all.

Tommy had been tirelessly yelling Sam's name when he had judged that the promised time had passed, desperately trying to get him to come back and let him out. Sam's heart ached when he heard him, but his head kept him focused on the investigation at hand. The faster he solved it, the faster Tommy would be out and back under his immediate protection. The faster Tommy would be taken away from Dream.

Sam had no idea what the Nightmare had been doing to Tommy. From the attitude the kid had when talking to the Warden, he seemed fine. Angry, yes. Desperate, also. The Warden would have felt the same way if he was trapped alongside his worst enemy for days on end. But Sam couldn't detect any lasting damage so far, mental or physical. That was at least sort of reassuring.

He hoped that Dream had at least had the courtesy to leave the poor boy alone. Then again, what Dream considered courteous and moral was up for debate.

Sam's eyes briefly skimmed over some of his previous notes from that day.

At 10:56 AM, Tommy's yells had stopped after realizing they had fallen on deaf ears. The Warden had managed to assess all the defensive layers of the prison once more with no interruptions save for some loud, obnoxiously raucous singing—if one could even qualify that atrocious off-key chirping as such—coming from the main cell. Tommy had clearly taken to trying to annoy his cellmate as best as he could with his own poorly prepped rendition of a one-man show. The concept made Sam chuckle just a little. He had ironically trapped Dream with the most painful torture instrument one could ever hope to find: Tommy and his overly spirited personality. It was a truly deadly weapon.

At 11:20 AM, the singing stopped. Another quiet filled Pandora's Vault for about ten whole minutes.

And at 11:30 AM the shouts were back. This time, they were from Dream.

At first, Sam had blocked them out, assuming that the criminal was trying to plead with him to take Tommy away and leave him alone in the blissful silence of his isolation chamber. Now, the cries only grew louder and louder and they increasingly became harder and harder to ignore.

"Sam! Sam!"

The warden glanced at his pocket watch, then continued writing:

11:40 PM

Still no leads. Same old clues.

"Sam!"

His hand cramped and he let all his frustration out on the notebook. The writing was far from neat, with spidery letters and slanted lines.

TNT undoubtedly used to attempt to break the defences. Culprit still unknown. The walls appear to be intact. Increased security needed on the outside of Pandora's Vault. Hiring more guards might be necessary, as well as installing a watchdog program for good measure.

"Sam, you might want to come to the cell! Quickly!"

Seeing as the contracted lockdown time has ended, I will consider letting the visitor—Tommy—leave

Sam paused for a moment or so.

but he will undoubtedly be watched closely until the culprit behind the break-out attempt is found.

"Sam! It's Tommy!"

Sam froze where he stood. The pen dropped from his hand. It fell to the floor. He heard it bounce a couple of times and rolled off into a dark corner.

Without thinking, Sam flung the notebook away, and grabbed his trident leaning against the wall. He set off down the corridors, weaving expertly in and out of the dark passageways reserved for his use. He knew them like the back of his hand. He had been forced to, especially in moments like this when they didn't seem to welcoming or familiar. The prison seemed to stretch out and close around him at the same time and the journey needlessly dragged on for longer than it should have. The longer he took to turn a corner, the faster his pace became until he was all but sprinting across the prison's floor plan. His armour clanked against him as he ran, and his dark green cloak billowed out behind him, brushing the walls of the narrow paths. With every step, his

heart beat faster, and his breath came out in short, quick huffs. A sinking nausea pooled in his stomach. He sensed something was off. He didn't know why. The calls had been loud, yes, but not urgent. There had been no panic in the criminal's voice when he had called him. There had been no trace of fear. No emotion would have been the best way to describe them.

The calls themselves betrayed nothing. But the words that came out... Those words sent a chill up his spine.

It's Tommy.

Strictly speaking, those two words could mean anything just as they could mean nothing. Yet, Sam knew something was wrong. Those two words were what sent him careening towards the main cell. Those two words were what made him fumble with keys, his hands shaking uncontrollably.

It's Tommy.

"Dream!" Sam yelled, finally managing to insert the correct key into the lock and turn it. A groan echoed from overhead and the lava began to drop. "What happened?"

Silence. Dream didn't reply. Neither did Tommy.

Neither did Tommy.

Sam's heart beat faster, his panic returning at full force. He frantically paced the landing, waiting for the burning orange curtain to completely disperse. He couldn't stay still.

Sam stared out across the lava lake separating the holding cell from the rest of the prison. The cell was in fact an enormous obsidian box hanging in the center of a large sweltering room thanks to sturdy chains welded to all four corners that ran up to fastenings in the ceiling. Below it was a deep sizzling pit of lava; above was a series of dispensers that poured out the flames when it was concealed. In the middle of that secluded, swinging box was the prisoner. He was waiting for him.

The Warden squinted at the scene. "Where's Tommy?" he demanded when he couldn't see the boy.

Dream raised his eyebrows. "You came really fast."

"Dream!" Sam demanded, still trying to peer into the holding cell. "Where is Tommy?"

The prisoner began to laugh. The small, light-hearted chuckles sent chills up Sam's spine. Dream slowly took a step to the side, revealing more of the darkened room behind him. Something was lying on the floor, against the back wall. It was obscured by the shadows, but the Warden could just make out the red and white of the figure's signature shirt.

Oh my gods—

In a flash, Sam activated the redstone bridge, and swiftly made his way across the lava. He barely waited until the platform had reached the other side before he jumped off, landing squarely in front of Dream.

It was 11:42 AM.

Sam shoved him aside. "Let me through!"

Dream didn't say anything, and let the Warden knock him to the side. Sam didn't think to check if Dream had somehow tried to leap for the bridge as it was pulled back. All his attention was focused on the figure lying across the cold, wet obsidian floor of the cell.

He rushed to the boy's side, crouched down and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "Tommy," he called. "Can you hear me?"

No reply.

Sam shook him ever so gently. "Tommy." His harsh tone from before had been dropped. "It's alright, I'm here. I'm going to let you out."

He forced himself to try and smile for when Tommy came to and eventually looked at him. He couldn't let the boy see how truly panicked he was. He'd never hear the end of it. Tommy would simply find it all too hilarious and never let it go, and oh boy that kid knew how to absolutely wreck someone's cold and strict reputation with nothing but a golden-hearted or borderline embarrassing anecdote. Sam would lose all credibility, and yet the thought still made him smile. If he had to lose it because of Tommy's teasing, he'd do so happily.

Still, after a minute or two, no reply came, and Sam's worst fears started to creep back into his mind. He jostled the boy's shoulder a little more roughly. "Tommy, answer me."

Tommy didn't move. Horror slowly began to overwhelm the Warden. He dropped his trident and shook the boy with his two strong hands.

"Wake up," he ordered, his voice shaking. When the boy still didn't move, Sam rolled him over onto his back, and what he saw made him only just barely hold back a strangled cry.

Tommy's face was unrecognizable. Black and blue bruises covered almost every inch of his skin, bumps the size of apples protruding from his forehead, cheeks, lips, and even neck. Dashed between the injuries were cuts of different sizes, oozing pus and blood that trickled down his roughed up face, dripping onto the grassy green cloth of his bandana, now hanging loosely part way over his shoulder. Sam's eyes trailed down to the rest of his body. It seemed fine at first glance until he spotted small bloodstains on the boy's clothes that were gradually growing bigger and bigger in front of his very eyes. The only thing that could be considered untouched was the boy's golden hair, and even then a few strands were still tainted, wet with the blood leaking out of everywhere else.

With trembling fingers, Sam dragged his hand through Tommy's locks, gently supporting his head and raising him up. He lifted him gently off the ground and into his lap. A warm damp feeling seeped through his gloves. Sam held his hand up to his eyes. It was soaked with more blood, this time dripping from an open wound on the back of Tommy's head.

"Tommy, wake up." Sam pat his cheek. "Can you walk? We'll get you fixed up, I promise. You just need to *wake up*."

Sam didn't know what he was doing. Tommy still hadn't reacted. He clearly couldn't hear him. If he had, he would have said something by now. The Warden brainstormed potential ways to bring him back to his senses. Perhaps if he just kept talking...

11:44 AM

"Sam. He's—"

Dream was cut off almost immediately.

"Son, can you hear me?" The name had slipped out so suddenly and so naturally, Sam barely noticed. He was so engrossed in his little world. The little world that only included him, and Tommy's body slumped in his arms. "Please, answer me!"

Every word that came out was a sharp and strangled gasp, weaving breathless sentences that were trying to keep Sam together. He had to keep trying.

"Tommy, I've come to let you out!" He smiled through his watering eyes, repeating himself again and again and again and yet not caring. He'd do it a thousand more times if that meant Tommy would *move*. "We can go to your bench after all this, and listen to some music. Cat, or Mellohi, you can choose. We can go see Tubbo, and Puffy too. We can watch the sunset, all together, and the sunrise too. Or even just you and Tubbo! Would you like that? You've been stuck in here for so long, I'm sorry..."

Every word he said was a dagger in him. Every sentence came out as a false promise, a lie. He was delaying the inevitable truth that had already begun to sink in. There was still something about the boy he couldn't yet face.

His eyes.

Surrounded on all sides by black blood-clotted rings the once bright crystal blue irises had lost their spark and had dulled to a dead, grey colour. They were half closed, the pupils barely visible, and unblinking.

Dream had the audacity to step in again. "It's not a pretty sight, is it?"

From the corner of his eyes, Sam saw the prisoner rub his bleeding knuckles, soothing the roughed up and torn dead skin and smearing blood over the back of his hands. Sam didn't know whose it was: Dream's own, or Tommy's.

Again, his tone was strange to hear. It was neither happy, nor sad. Neutral. Simply stating the facts.

"Sam, he's gone. He's dead."

This time, Sam didn't interrupt the prisoner. He didn't try to deny what he was told. He knew. He had known for the past couple of minutes. There was no way Tommy would ever be that quiet, that still.

Sam held Tommy's arm up. Three hearts, vertically aligned, were tattooed on his skin. Everyone had them, but not all of them were the same. Sam had never thought to ask Tommy to see his own.

The first one was slashed in two by a sword's blade dealing a fatal blow a long time ago in a dark, underground room. The second had a hole shot right through the middle of it, courtesy of an arrow taken in a duel to try and save a nation now burned down into ash. And now the third one—which had remained untouched for ages—was shattered into a dozen pieces.

If Sam had needed any more proof that Tommy was gone, this was it.

Silently, he pulled Tommy's body closer to him, his arms encircling him like a protective shield. He let his tears fall without a sound, his head buried in the boy's shoulder.

At 11:47 AM, Sam finally let the truth sink in.

The world seemed to fade and blur, erase itself and everyone else in it until only two people remained. Until there was only Sam and Tommy. Until there was only Sam. His sobs started out as small and subtle. They gradually grew louder and louder, just as the cries from before had, except this time Sam couldn't tune them out. He couldn't deny, he couldn't pretend. His lungs threatened to burst. He was overcome with violent tremours that he wanted to devour him alive. He threw his head back and let out a loud, desperate cry of agony, tears streaming down his face. His grip around the corpse tightened, and he cradled the ragdoll body softly in his armoured arms, which were now wet with the same blood as everything around him was.

My boy...

The pain of his loss tore through his entire body like a hurricane.

Tommy was dead.

After so many hardships, so many wars, so many sacrifices, Tommy had lost his last life tossing and turning after being ruthlessly beaten on the freezing, hard floor of a prison cell. A prison cell Sam built himself. The place the Warden had poured blood, sweat and tears into had now stripped him of one of the most precious things in the world to him—and once again the blood, sweat and tears stained its walls.

"Let me out, Sam!"

If only he had listened.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, distraught. Warm tears dripped onto the body. He rocked the boy gently backwards and forwards. "I'm so sorry... I promised I'd protect you. I've failed. I've failed you..."

The feared, almighty warden of Pandora's Vault, with his cold demeanor and heart of stone, collapsed, discarding his authority to grieve for the kid that had only brought wars and problems to the land. At least, that's what many kept groaning about. Sam knew better.

Wilbur's final death had been witnessed by everyone, in pompous ceremony and chaos. Tommy's passing was a much more private and sullen matter. It was nothing like what the boy had ever fought for, ever cared for...

"I guess it was just never meant to be." The infamous words hung in the clammy air, and Dream made no move or sound to retract them.

Sam froze, the boy's corpse still huddled against his chest. He lay the body gently on the ground, and then suddenly leapt to his feet, trident in hand. The warden launched the prongs forward, until they were only one small push away from impaling the criminal's neck.

"You killed him!" he screamed, shaking. He kept the sharp points trained on the prisoner.

"He had it coming." Dream gently and calmly pushed the trident a safe distance away from him with a teasing finger. He marched over to the back of his cell and slumped down against the wall. His emerald gaze bore deep into Sam's eyes, framed by the dirty brown locks of hair that curtained his face. "Goodnight."

Goodnight.

Sam didn't go after Dream immediately. "That's all you have to say?" he spluttered, indignant.

"Should I say more?"

"You murdered a child!" the Warden screamed. He towered over the crouched figure, armour and clothes still splattered with Tommy's blood. His blackened eyes stared him down, bright green irises seething with anger.

"More than once, in fact. He lost all three to me. I feel honoured."

Dream was drenched in blood too, and they were both equally responsible for the blood they had on their hands. It was like staring into a mirror. The Warden couldn't stomach it.

Sam advanced again. "I'll kill you."

Dream outstretched his arms as an invitation. "Go ahead," he said, "stab me. Murder me. They all want you to anyway." His lips curled up into a smile.

His insolence and overall attitude towards the unspeakable act he had committed was vile, and almost made Sam wretch. Clearly, Dream's prolonged stay in the Vault had done nothing to sway his attitude.

That was the last straw for Sam. A red veil of rage blinded the Warden, and he lunged forward. Before he knew it, his trident was buried deep into Dream's shoulder. The criminal hissed and bit his lip. His hand weakly grabbed the prongs, and he tried to pry them out. In a matter of moments, the prisoner's uniform was stained with red. Still, he didn't scream.

Sam wanted him to. Oh, how he wanted to hear Dream *shriek* bloody murder and cry for mercy. He wanted to hear him beg and wail and plead pitifully. He wanted him to, just so Sam could refuse and give him none. He held the trident firmly in place.

"You think killing me will solve anything?" the prisoner gasped out, still trying to fight back.

Sam didn't reply, jaw clenched and panting heavily. He pushed the prongs deeper, until Dream let out an audible cry.

It was short lived, as the prisoner shook his head a few seconds later, chuckling. "Sam, you're failing your duty. Again."

"The only thing I've done wrong is keep you alive for so long."

"You kept me alive for a reason, and everyone knows it."

The Warden froze.

"Oh, so now you want to listen to me, do you?" Dream tutted, rolling his eyes.

"The Revival Book is not real," Sam muttered through gritted teeth. "You've fooled and duped us all. That's what you always do."

"Well if you're so confident about that, what's stopping you from killing me?"

Dream outstretched his arms once again, inviting the warden to rip out his trident and stab him where it would truly matter, where Sam definitely did want to impale him. One precise strike to his heart, and it could all be over.

Sam mulled it over carefully, and he was shocked to find himself hesitating.

"There's a part of you that believes me, Sam. I can tell."

Sam glared at him again, taking in the glee of the prisoner's emerald eyes that always burned brightly, even in the shadows of the dimly lit cell.

"I've learned to take everything you say with a grain of salt," he replied. More than a grain, in fact: he took it all with an entire ship load of salt, making every suspicion Sam had of Dream even more bitter and hard to swallow.

"Do you not trust me to be changed man?" Dream smirked.

"A changed man?" Sam spat, incredulous. "You *killed* Tommy!"

"C'mon, Sammy," Dream sighed. "What happened to the good old days, eh? Before all this, before all the wars, before—"

"Before I realized you were a monster?" Sam interrupted. "Those days are long gone, Dream, and they're never going to come back."

"You still need me. You still need the book. You still need me to bring Tommy back."

Sam didn't know what to think anymore. He clenched the handle of his trident, fighting the urge to end the criminal right there and then. Half of him knew he should get rid of this man once and for all and be done with it, but the other half inhabited a small glimmer of hope.

A small spark of something.

Something.

It was better than nothing at all.

He looked back at Tommy's body. His heart tore itself apart once more. As much as seeing Dream lying dead in the exact same way would bring him nothing but joy, he didn't want to be his executioner. He'd be no better than him if he was.

He made his decision at 11:49 AM.

He pressed the sole of his foot on Dream's chest and swiftly ripped the trident out of his shoulder. The prisoner winced, biting down on his lip. He immediately clenched the gushing wound through his shirt, trying to stop the blood flow.

Muttering curses, Dream faced the Warden again. "Was that really necessary?" he tutted.

Sam loomed over him, face still alight with fury. "I told you to stay quiet," he told him, shoving the trident into the harness behind his back. Droplets of blood dripped from prongs that had previously been embedded inside of Dream. He turned away. "If you die, good riddance. If you don't, I'll consider facing you again."

"Can't wait," Dream hissed, promptly taking off and ripping up his orange shirt into strips to bind his shoulder.

There was no use in dwelling on what could be. Tommy was gone, and there was nothing to be done, at least right then and right now. Gently, Sam knelt back down beside the corpse. With two, trembling fingers, he closed Tommy's eyelids. The bloodied and injured face was unbearable to look at, and imagining the agony in the boy's last moments was too much. The warden removed the green cape from around his shoulders, and gently wrapped it around Tommy, leaving only a part of his face exposed, just so he could still see him and know he was there. He then gently rose to his feet, heaving the body into his arms. Tommy's head lolled limply to the side, pressing his beaten cheek against the smooth, cold surface of the warden's armour.

He had never been so silent.

If Sam tried really hard, he could pretend the boy was sleeping, cuddled up in his arms with his cloak for a blanket. But Sam didn't try to imagine. He had stopped pretending. He was too exhausted, too mentally drained to even attempt to deny anymore.

Sam couldn't help but notice how light Tommy was, too. The warden had a lot of upper body strength, but that wasn't the reason behind the drastic realization. Tommy was always a thin, lanky sort of kid, but now he looked and felt more skeletal than anything. The potato diet the prison had been feeding him and Dream during the lockdown had done this. The boy had lost a lot of weight, and would have quite possibly lost a lot of strength as well.

A lot of strength. Strength that could have potentially saved his life.

Sam could blame Dream. He could blame the culprit of the explosive distraction up on the prison's roof. He could blame the gods for being so cruel or the whole universe that had aligned to make this happen. He could blame all of them, and yet he knew exactly whose fault it really was.

Sam's stomach dropped even further than it had before. He felt another rush of tears dampen his cheeks, and let them fall again onto the battered and bruised face he was carrying off. It was so young, too young. He was only just barely sixteen.

I'm so sorry... He held Tommy closer to him. *It's all my fault...*

Sam's first mistake as Warden had proven to be fatal. The outside world found out why at the stroke of twelve.

Chapter One: A Buried Flag

Heavy sheets of rain tore down from a dark sky like shards of glass pouring from clouds in the heavens above. The afternoon sun had vanished behind a stormy blanket, plunging the world below into a melancholic palette of abysmal colours that left humid traces on everything it touched. The wind howled over the vast expanses of wild land and through the tight gaps in the streets of packed towns and villages. It banged wooden shutters and picked up entire heaps of leaves, throwing them around like toys over the roads and paths. Not many were keen to venture out of their homes in such a tempest, but that didn't stop them from watching the small procession that ambled by from afar.

It had started off far across the land, at the Northern coastline and the looming prison sitting along it. It then followed the slippery wooden road towards the South, and had traveled it all the way to the remains of a once great nation lying to the East. From there, it continued past the ruins and towards a secluded part of the wilderness beyond, surrounded by a landscape of rolling hills and fields of bracken. On other days, a small gathering of that size attracted little to no attention, and everyone went about their own business. This time, however, everyone that came across it took note.

Young and old, enemies and allies; it didn't matter. Almost all of them showed some form of courtesy. Lots simply bowed. Others nodded quickly and retreated into their homes to get on with their chores or to grieve silently in their own comfortable solitude. Some threw flowers of every kind across the path, the fragile stems and delicate petals ending up crushed under the mourners' feet.

Niki was curled up in the cushioned surroundings of a window seat, a fire crackling in the background and a delicious smelling plate of cookies in the oven. A nice, steamy mug of hot chocolate rested in the crook of her hands. A book lay open in her lap. She read the words without much thought, none of them sinking in completely. She barely raised her gaze when she heard the heavy footsteps outside. She saw the coffin, though. When the procession had eventually moved on, the sweet chocolate in her hands left a bitter aftertaste on her tongue.

Punz had watched everything unfold from afar, his white robes and glistening armour shining bright against the stormy clouds overhead. His sword swung aimlessly by his side, his hand resting on the hilt. His eyes were narrowed against the downpour, and he knelt down on one knee, with no difference or sincerity to be seen.

Someone had even stopped the procession in its tracks to rest his hand on top of the oak wood box. Eret inhaled deeply, and briefly took off his crown. He was there as an old friend rather than as a monarch. With a shake, he unrolled a large blue, white, red, black and yellow flag and draped it ceremoniously over the casket. The monarch then bowed once more, exchanging brief, wordless condolences with those present. He then returned to the warmth and safety of his palace.

Fundy was busy hoeing and replanting a section of a wheat field, trying to get it done before the worst part of the storm hit. When he saw the small group make their way past him, spying the wooden casket under the L'Manberg flag, he stood up straight and raised a hand in a trembling salute. He whispered a prayer under his breath, and cursed as a small tear formed at the corner of his eye.

Beyond the remains of L'Manberg, the weather was no better. If anything, it was worse. Sharp blasts of icy air slashed at the tiny gathering standing at the stop of a hill at the edge of the moorland. Cloaks and coats flapped furiously in the wind, heavy with water. Soaked hair stuck to faces and necks, cold droplets cascading down damp, frozen skin and leaving a trail of chills in their wake.

Despite the wet misery of their surroundings, the gathering made no move to leave. They didn't complain about the weather, or even utter a sound. They were all too caught in the heavy curtains of grief that draped their whole world in black.

A large, misshapen stone lay a few steps in front of them, at the head of a rectangle of freshly overturned ground. A shovel lay discarded to the side, diamond blade covered in mud. The rain fell hard, flattening the newly dug mound and turning it into a heap of soggy earth that gradually pressed itself back into place.

Captain Puffy had spent most of her life on the high seas. She had braved storms and downpours unlike any the SMP had ever even seen. A little fall of rain was nothing to her, until today. Today, the rain was the hardest she had ever had to bear.

She reached up to her head and removed her tricorn. Water spewed out of the brim, washing down onto her hooves. The two colourful feathers perched on top now lay flat against the felt. She held it close to her chest, her sheep-like ears twitching as they were abruptly exposed to the cold. Her fluffy brown and white hair was sprinkled with sparkling drops of water, glittering in the dim light like jewels and pearls threaded onto her curls.

Her eyes never left the stone before her, except when something small tugged at her uniform.

Sam Nook—or Nook, as he was more commonly known—looked up at her with his wide pale blue eyes. The raccoon's little paw scrunched up the hem of her coat. His brown fur was soaked through and through, sticking to his bony frame like silk drapes as water drizzled down the clumps.

She held out her hand and crouched down. With a small whimper, Nook wasted no time in scampering up the captain's arm and snuggling around her neck like a scarf, buried warmly in the semi-dry part of her hair. His small hands and claws scratched at her skin, and his bushy tail slowly stroked her cheek. Puffy reached up and absentmindedly stroked the raccoon's forehead and snout. The animal let out a small string of pained whispers, leaning into her touch for reassurance.

Nook was one of the last ones to find out about what happened. It was cruel to have left him in the dark, to be sure, but the general consensus between everyone was that they couldn't tell the raccoon anything. The small animal had been just as attached to the departed as the departed had been to him. The heartbreak he was going to endure was something no one wanted to cause, or witness for that matter.

Then again, as per usual, rumours were spread and secrets got out. It was only a matter of time until Nook was frantically squeaking gibberish at everyone he encountered, demanding answers they didn't dare give. Now, he was caught up in mourning's web of sadness, stuck there with others.

The captain screwed her eyes shut for a few seconds, then opened them. More warm tears had formed, and she did her best not to break down once again, fingers digging into the tricorn she held. Her hooves nervously tapped against the ground. Mud slipped into every nook and cranny, sticking all the way up her legs and weighing her down even more than the despair already was.

She turned to the man next to her. "Sam?" she called softly.

Sam didn't reply. His clothes were darkened by the storm. His golden armour had dulled to a murky shade, lit up only by the scarce flashes of lightning that tore through the heavens, and his trident was safely secured in the harness strapped to his back. His green hair was plastered to his scalp, loose and longer strands hanging over his eyes. He stared out aimlessly into the distance. His back was as straight as a soldier's.

Everything about him then was too formal, too dark, too tense. She only wished she could see him smile again.

"Sam," Puffy called again in a whisper. She shuffled closer to the Warden, adjusting to the raccoon's weight around her shoulders. "Are you alright?"

She almost regretted asking. It was a dumb question. She already knew the answer, but her instinct still pushed it out of her. Sam had been asking her the same question repeatedly the past few days, in the soft tone that he used to try and mask his own breakdowns. He had been worrying about everyone, yet no one had thought to worry about him. The captain gently touched his arm.

The Warden closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. He let out a long, shaky breath. "Yeah," he replied, his voice strained. He coughed. Nook poked his snout out of Puffy's hair.

Captain Puffy gazed at Sam's face, watching as a small tear slipped down his jawline along with the raindrops and fell onto the gasmask hanging around his neck. His gaze, always so pensive when passive, often gave him a saddened eye. Today, it was more than justified. Silently, she held his hand. It was shaking, and she squeezed it tightly. He looked down at her, and pulled her into a trembling embrace, burning tears now streaming freely.

Puffy had promised herself that day that she wouldn't crack, knowing that her dear companions needed an anchor. However, now she had sunk into the safety of Sam's arms, she couldn't hold it in any longer. She clung on to him like a lifebelt. She had moved through the aftermath of the news in a daze, too shaken to let it all properly sink in, but now she had seen the body and had helped lay it in its final resting place. Now it was real. Now all that was left was the grief and the strife they had all had to accept. She didn't think she'd be able to. She didn't think she was strong enough to.

"I failed him," she sobbed in a whisper, her fingers digging into the soaked material of Sam's sleeves.

Immediately, Sam leapt to her defense. "You didn't," he choked. "Puffy, none of this is your fault, it was me, I did—"

"We all failed him," another voice whispered above the rainfall.

Ranboo stood a little further from the three others present, hunched over. His red and green eyes were locked on the grave, brimming with tears that he struggled to push down. A heavy, fur trimmed cape was raised high over his head, held up by his horns and only just barely protecting him from the rain. Small streams of water trickled down from the white fur collar onto his boots. The heavy blue velvet making up the rest of the cloak stuck to his back, following the hunched curvature of his spine. He shivered as the wind blasted around him, and winced every time a stray droplet of water somehow managed to hit its target and burn him.

Enderfolk would rarely deign to venture out in rainstorms, for fear of literally being pelted to death with burning drops from the sky, but Ranboo had. He was only half enderman, but going out in a storm with no protection was still a death sentence. He attended anyway.

With his pointed ears plastered against his head, his trembling fingers picked at the allium flower he held. He plucked the magenta strands one by one, dropping them to the floor before they were eventually carried off by the stormy wind.

"We all failed him," he stammered. He started shaking uncontrollably.

Immediately, Puffy reached out to him. "No, Ranboo," she whispered. "You didn't—"

The hybrid stepped away, out of her grasp. He pulled his cloak closer around him. "I failed him too."

The captain sunk back to her place in the Warden's arms, hugging him tightly once more. Sam kept holding her, just as he always did. He would never let her go. He was going to keep her safe. Despite everything, she had to force herself to believe that.

She cast a quick look around them, searching, hoping to see another face, one she had thought would turn up—especially to his best friend's burial.

Ranboo had been told to pass the message on, and he reportedly had. Alas, nothing. If anything, he seemed to have vanished off the face of the realms. The captain had been looking out for him on the way, just to make sure he hadn't silently joined them without them knowing. She was waiting to be able to comfort him, to hold him and reassure him. She checked again.

Tubbo still wasn't there.

The moorland was empty, save for the four of them huddled at the top of the grassy knoll. At least, it looked empty at first glance. Soon after, Puffy spied a figure in the distance, trudging towards them through the mud and the torrential rain. She looked up at Sam, and wordlessly let him know of the new arrival. The Warden's lips pursed into a line. He didn't make any move to so much as acknowledge the newcomer.

As the figure closed the distance between them, Puffy could see the pair of large, tattered wings made of glistening feathers as black as obsidian rising over the figure's head, sheltering him as best as they could from the storm. When the avian arrived at the top of the hill, he waited a while before speaking, glancing at each attendee in turn. He then reached up and removed his striped green and white wide-brimmed hat, revealing a bird's nest of messy and damp blond hair underneath. He was smiling widely, his entire face alight like the rays of a warm morning sun. Alone, he managed to brighten up the stormy world around them.

Everything about his presence was severely out of place.

"Hello, Puffy," Philza began cordially.

The captain nodded politely. Sam hadn't reacted.

Phil made the first move. "Sam," he greeted.

The Warden ignored him. He inhaled and exhaled deeply, gritting his teeth and clenching his jaw. His hand squeezed Puffy's shoulder tighter. The avian sighed, defeated. He turned to the third figure.

"Ranboo," he called.

The hybrid looked up, immediately wincing as raindrops splattered his sensitive black and white skin.

Phil held out his hand. "You shouldn't be out here. Remember what we said about going out in the rain?"

An air of confusion painted itself across Ranboo's face. He stared at Philza, eyes wide and lips parted. He looked like he was about to say something, but immediately resigned himself, reaching into the folds of his clothes and withdrawing a small, leather-bound journal and a pen. Frantically, he began to scribble inside. The rain continued to pour, staining the pages with fat stains and turning the ink into black rivers. The hybrid tried to brush the water off, to no avail, and the hushed sound of white-hot sizzling against his skin made Puffy's insides curl. Soon enough, his movements became quicker and more erratic.

Phil smiled sadly. "You can do that at home, mate. We need to go. Techno didn't know where you wandered off to."

He carefully attempted to pry the journal from his hands. Ranboo made a move to grab it, only to recoil when his hands touched the rainfall once again. Defeated, he let the older man take the book and store it safely in his small pack.

"I'm sorry, I just had to..." Ranboo trailed off, grabbing anxiously at his wrist and his sopping locks of wet hair.

Puffy could instantly sense his discomfort, but Sam's grip around her was iron, desperate iron in need of comfort.

"Let's get you home, alright?"

Phil wrapped a tender arm around the hybrid's shoulders—as far up as he could reach—and raised a wing high over Ranboo's back. The rain water filtered through the broken feathers, dripping onto both figures underneath. It was still better than nothing.

The avian began to guide the hybrid away, but at the last moment, Ranboo turned back. He pressed what remained of the allium flower into Sam's hand, and after exchanging a final look with both the Warden and the captain, retreated back into Phil's care. He tugged at the edge of his cloak, pulling it further over his eyes, and was escorted off like a small child.

Captain Puffy watched on as the two figures made their way down the slope and ventured back out into the moor. Before long, they became merely black silhouettes in the distance and like ghosts, faded away in the storm.

"Did you see him?" Sam muttered.

Puffy turned her attention back to him. "What?"

"He didn't even look at the grave." His hand clenched tightly around the remains of the allium. "He didn't even look at it..."

Only the stem and a couple of buds remained of the once vibrant magenta flower. Sam stepped forwards, then dropped to one knee over the burial ground. He dropped the remains of the plant on top of the upturned ground, then gently stroked the misshapen headstone.

Puffy knelt down beside him. "Sam—"

"He didn't even look at it!"

He gripped the stone with his two hands, almost ready to tear it out of the ground entirely, to break it in two, to—

The captain bleated in terror, grabbing his arm and stopping him from doing something potentially stupid to himself or to the tomb beneath them.

"Tommy called out for him," Sam whispered above the storm. "He called for Phil."

"When?"

"When the lockdown was initiated, when he realized he wouldn't be able to get out until I came to get him. He could have called for anyone, but he called for Phil. He called for him, and what does he get in return? The man who he considered his father doesn't even look at his own grave. Instead he smiles and nurtures another kid in his place."

Puffy felt him clench his fist, and his voice quivered. Silence fell, the Warden's words sinking in. Nook leapt out of Puffy's fleece and scampered next to Sam, placing a caring paw on his muddied knee.

"The man who Tommy considered his father did look at it," Puffy finally murmured. "He's still looking at it." Trembling from both the cold and the overwhelming emotions, she soothingly placed her hand on Sam's. "He's even kneeling on it right now."

Sam held his head in his hands, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I was never as dear to him as Phil was..."

"How do you know that?"

"I..." He dragged out the silence, clearly broken, yet thoughtful. He lowered his tone. "I just know. I killed him..."

"You didn't—"

"I did! I promised I'd protect him with my life, and then he died on my watch!"

"Sam—"

"On *my* watch, Puffy!"

"There was nothing you could have done—"

"You don't understand," he choked. "There's so much I could have done! He could have lived if only I— He was so thin when I carried his body away, so thin... He must have been so weak. He would have never stood a chance against Dream, but I... I never thought he would *kill* him..."

"You had no way of knowing he would."

"But I did! It seems so obvious that Dream would do something like that, and everyone could see that. Everyone except me."

Nook leapt onto the warden's lap, nuzzling the cold metal of his armoured chest. Puffy shuffled closer to them both. She rested her head on her best friend's shoulder, in a crook that she had claimed as her own months and months ago. Sam simply hunched over, exhausted out of his mind.

No one had any more tears left to cry, and no energy to cry them even if they did. They didn't want to talk, argue, reassure or place blame where it may or may not have been deserved. Their strength was completely and utterly drained.

A thin trail of lightning cracked overhead. The thunder rumbled, and the downpour worsened. The rain fell harder, making it impossible for anyone to see two steps in front of them.

Fundy glanced quickly up at the sky, then lay down his hoe and scampered back to his burrow.

Niki barely reacted, still seated by her window. Her book was closed. Her hands were clasped together, and her head was bowed. The cup of hot chocolate was discarded to the side, now cold and unappealing.

Punz was long gone from his spot on the hill. Duty had called, and he answered. Paying respects didn't get him actually paid in any way.

Having just crossed over the borders of the SMP's land, Philza and Ranboo took shelter in the circular, crumbling watchtower looking out over the ruins of L'Manberg.

Puffy, Sam and Nook stayed huddled on top of the hill, the mud from the newly dug grave staining their knees and legs.

Six feet below them, the young boy they mourned so dreadfully lay in peaceful slumber, blissfully dry in the simple coffin—still draped under the magnificent L'Manberg flag—so carefully crafted for him. Underneath the hammered-on lid, his battered and bruised face was covered by a simple cloth. His muscles were blackened, bruised and taught as the rigor mortis had settled in. Matted blond hair was stained with blood, and a prominent bruise on his throat burned a dulled purple. He was so broken, and yet, he was laid to rest whole. Perhaps the only things that didn't sit entirely right were the frown on his face and the peaceful nature of his position.

They were far too out of place for one who used to be such a bright and energetic young boy. A young hero, who had been ready to face the entire world head-on. A young hero, who was now dead.

Goodnight, sweet Theseus, and may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Puffy hoped at least they and the heavens would, even if the rest of the mortal world did not.

Chapter Two: The Phantom Of The Vault

The world had faded to black.

Then, it lit up again.

And faded.

And returned.

Blinding lights flashed in quick succession, dancing in front of his vision like fireflies. They intensified, burning him. He tried to scream, but no sound came out. The flashing continued, picking up speed by the second until a world of pure white shocked his senses. Mouth open in gaping horror, the boy screwed his eyes shut. The dark returned once more, and stayed.

He waited.

Tentatively, his eyes fluttered open. The blinding light had disappeared completely, leaving nothing but dark spots phasing in and out of existence. He blinked a couple of times, trying to get his bearings. The stains soon faded to different shades of red—from wine, to cherry, to blood—that ringed around his view.

The world swam before him, and the dizziness made his body tremble. His feet dragged him backwards across the cold, hard floor he stood on, and he stumbled. Immediately, his arm shot out behind him as he tried to stabilize himself. His palm hit the wall. A rush of cold shot up his body and the boy let out a small, strained yelp. He jumped away from the wall. The landing was slow, and he practically floated down to the floor. His feet touched the ground without a sound. The boy's breathing accelerated. The back of his head pounded as if he had been whacked with a mallet. He ran his hands through his hair, tugging painfully on it as he tried to subdue the pain that overwhelmed every other part of him.

The boy screwed his eyes shut, willing it all to go away. He couldn't take it anymore. It was too much for him to bear. The agony made him want to fall to the floor and scream his heart out. A moment later, whether by pure coincidence or wishful thinking, the

pounding lessened before stopping completely. He opened his eyes again. He looked around.

His surroundings were just as dark as he had left them. He was standing in the middle of what he could only describe as a large, black box. The ceiling was low, and the walls and floor were made up of black, rough rock. In a few corners, purple goo dripped down. Veins of the same colour were etched into the walls. To his right shimmered the only light source he could see, a curtain of burning orange. It fell slowly. Heat radiated from it, growing more intense the closer he got to it. It spat and hissed and popped continuously, each sound followed by smouldering specks flying out and dotting the floor.

He was still a little dazed, and most of the room was swallowed in shadows, but he managed to just about make out a large, dark splatter on one of the walls. He couldn't tell how he managed to make it out against the black, but he did nonetheless. He moved closer, reaching forward towards it.

His entire silhouette was pale, so pale that it was barely there. He was almost completely transparent. He could barely make out the outlines of his own arm. The rare parts that he could glimpse were scarred with purple and red bruises. He shivered.

"I know you're here."

He dropped his arm. The boy held his breath, the headache returning and running wild once more in the anxiety of the moment. He turned towards the voice.

The back of the obsidian room was cloaked in darkness, barely lit up by the wall of falling lava. It took him a while to distinguish what—or rather who—was there. He had to squint and ignore the red circles floating around his vision. The outline of a figure met his gaze. He inadvertently took a step back.

Someone was sitting against the wall, his back pressed against the stone. One of his legs was brought up to his chest, while the other was stretched out in front of him. Clad in an orange clothes stained with patches of red, the figure's head was bowed. Scruffy, dirty blond hair fell in front of his forehead, most of it tied back in a messy, greasy bun. Almost all the exposed areas of his body were either scratched or scarred. Some looked more recent and cut deep, others were merely thin white lines of the past that were almost invisible. His eyes were mean and animalistic, partially hidden by the shadows, but still very much alive and sparkling. The boy could see the malicious glow of his pupils as he stared vaguely in front of him.

"I know you're here," the figure repeated, his voice as smooth and sharp as a sword's blade. His fists clenched tightly by his side. "I can't see you, but I can *feel* you."

The boy backed away cautiously and swallowed hard, ignoring the uncomfortable lump rising in his throat. He felt his body temperature drop even further, and a chill ran up his spine. He didn't try to speak. The mere thought of answering this man terrified him.

The stranger spoke again. "People think I'm insane. They locked me up in here for that very reason once they realized that I was too precious to kill. Insane, mad, psychotic, whatever they could call me, they did, but I'm not. I can *sense* you."

The stranger raised his head up and laid it back against the wall. A large scar stretched over the bridge of his nose. The glint in his eyes did not leave their invisible spot in the distance, and he glared into the lava. He wasn't scary, exactly—the best way to describe him would have been intimidating. The way his voice was so calm was unnerving to say the least. He managed to keep it so even, so smooth. So natural, in fact, that it almost wasn't.

He paused, drawing in a deep, shaky breath. "Or maybe," he concluded thoughtfully. "Maybe I *am* going crazy in here..."

The boy watched as he shuffled his body into a more comfortable position. He then closed his eyes. He said nothing more and once his stare was gone, the oppressive pressure that filled the room seemed to lighten and subside.

It was a brief interaction, if it could even be qualified as one. The boy expected the stranger to say something else, anything at all. But the stranger fell silent, and stilled. The position he was in didn't exactly look the most cosy, but appeared tolerable at most. His breath slowed down to a slow, regular rhythm.

The boy made sure to stay quiet himself, not wanting to wake up the sleeping beast. He turned his attention to the wall of lava. He hadn't exactly questioned it. His head hurt from almost everything around him: the sounds, the movements, even his own thoughts, though they were few. However, the curtain of falling orange was enticing, and he moved closer. Still trembling, he held out his hand.

The lava fell through his fingers, continuing to drip down to gods know where below. The heat wasn't searing on his skin, nor did it give him any burns or blisters. It only left him with a deliciously warm aftermath that made his whole body tingle pleasantly. The boy stuck his arms further in and shivered as a creeping sensation overcame his skin. In a trance, he walked in and kept going forwards. He felt like he was trudging through a

sea of soft, velvet curtains that pushed down his shoulders and head. He wasn't even paying attention to what his feet were walking on, if anything at all. All he wanted to do was curl up into a ball and close his eyes, gently lulled to sleep by the gentle heat and the softness of his surroundings.

And that's just what he did.

He closed his eyes and let himself be carried by the flowing warmth. He didn't know if he was moving forwards, or backwards, but it didn't matter. The pain in his head subdued, until it was nothing more than a background sensation. He allowed his lips to curve into a small smile—a first for him—and he exhaled deeply.

Peace.

He couldn't explain it any other way.

He was wrapped up in the loving arms of pure and utter peace. He could stay there forever. He *wanted* to stay there forever. He had no past and no future, he merely wanted to stay in this comforting present forever.

Soon after, the warmth began to fade, replaced by a chill unlike anything the boy had felt up to then, as far back as he could remember, which was virtually nothing. He had never felt a chill quite like the one that started to tear through him now.

He opened his eyes.

At first glance, he thought he was back in the obsidian chamber and had somehow floated in and out in a full circle. But when he didn't see the mysterious man against the back wall, he took a closer look around. The walls were indeed of the same black rock as the other room was, but it was definitely bigger. The floor beside the lava wall dipped down to smooth stone brick. The boy tentatively stuck a foot forwards. He stepped off the stone and back on the black floor.

He started to walk. He could do nothing else. He shivered, and wrapped his arms around himself. He kept going, casting nervous looks around him. The walls and halls around him were dark and cold. They formed an eerie, pitch black void in his blurred vision. The boy's steps were light, and he managed to navigate the floorplan with ease. He didn't know where he was going, he was only following where the halls took him.

Perhaps he should have simply gone back to the lava.

He dragged his pale fingers along the obsidian, feeling the rough edges scrape at his fingertips. Every time he came to a corner, he peered around it ever so cautiously. The rooms and halls seemed to change constantly, in both size and temperature. One minute, he'd be almost frozen to the spot by a gust of wind, the next, melting in sweltering humidity. There was no way to adjust. Maybe that was the intention.

The boy kept going, his senses becoming more and more muddled as he went. With barely any light, he lacked any sense of orientation. He didn't know if he was travelling forwards, sideways, or in circles. He realized, horrified, that he was lost.

Frantically, he began to walk faster. His footsteps made no noise. He made no progress in his journey. There were different halls and different walls and different floors and different ceilings no matter which way he went. The darkness grew more and more absolute. Everything was disappearing.

He finally stood still. He looked around him. He couldn't tell if he was standing in a hallway, or in the middle of a room. The blackness around him seemed infinite, only broken by the spots of red dancing across his eyes.

The boy opened his mouth.

"Hello—?"

He immediately clapped a hand to his mouth. He held his throat, suddenly and painfully aware of a rawness he hadn't noticed before. The simple word had come out as a breathy squeak, barely audible to the boy himself, never mind anyone that he tried to reach out to. The back of his throat burned, and he immediately closed his mouth. His thumb rubbed over a swollen bump on his neck and he winced. He couldn't see what it was exactly, but the pain he felt when he tried to speak or touch it was white hot. He felt like someone dragged a knife down his mouth and neck whenever he let out any sort of sound.

Don't speak, don't speak—

His head started pounding again, as painful as it was before. Against his better judgment, he tried again. The hushed call was soon interrupted by a bout of painful, raspy coughing.

Help me, he pleaded quietly. I don't know where I am...

Chapter Three: Red Whispers

The sores on the Warden's arm were taking forever to heal.

They were still raw and cherry red with only a thin, delicate veil of healing skin stretched over them. The slightest scratch could break them open again. Scars belonging to failed stitching attempts bordered each painful ring, the threads long gone and painstakingly pulled out by hand. The healing herbs he had packed into the wounds were starting to resurface as mushy, dark masses. Their sweet scents had turned putrid and vile, like a decaying corpse oozing out of his body.

Sam blinked at the scars, gently tracing the edges with his index. He traced every gnash and indented scar, all of them belonging to his own set of teeth. Even now, he could still smell and taste his own flesh on his tongue as red tendrils squeezed his limbs so tightly they turned pale and purple.

Two months. Two months had passed since he was trapped over the Egg and almost ate himself alive. Two months that should have allowed the wounds to heal properly, yet they were still blistering and open. Sam had tried everything: stitches, ointments, medicinal herbs, healing potions, and even tried leaving them alone. Nothing had worked. The thin veil of skin he had noticed just today was the first sign of any progress.

He took a deep breath, and wound the bandage back around his forearm. He clenched his hand and curled his fingers, raising his arm up off the table.

The longer he thought about it, the more his stomach churned, and the more his injured arm seemed to sting.

The prison's entry hall was silent, and gloomy. Walls and floors of blackstone were swallowed by shadows. Carved quartz columns held up the tens of tons of obsidian layers built above, encasing the main structure in an impenetrable barrier, protecting it from the outside world—or rather, just as importantly, protecting the outside world from the dangers Pandora's Vault held within.

Sam leaned back in his chair, allowing the shadows to envelop him in their dark, eerie void. There had been no reason for him to switch on any lights. He was alone, and no visitors were expected. They never would be, ever again. The only light source was to be the soft glow of the large purple Nether portal on the opposite end of the room. Its curling rays cast abstract violet spots over the walls and floor.

A shiver ran up his spine. His cold golden armour nipped at his skin. His breath echoed in the painfully lonely halls. When that kind of silence fell, something else picked up.

Hissing whispers, as hushed as falling sand, wormed back into the forefront of his mind. They were incessant.

They haunted him day and night, switching between background noise and loud screams of pure eldritch horror that almost burst his eardrums. They seemed to be coming from everywhere, from his injured arms to the forgotten depths of his head.

He knew exactly what they were, and how he came to be plagued with them. They were carried with the Egg's orange spores, the seeds of its wickedness that sprouted both indoctrinating speeches and bleeding tendrils littered with thorns wherever they landed.

Sam had learned to live with them, but that didn't mean he accepted them. He never would.

He shifted, a breeze drifting against his skin and freezing his insides. He rubbed his hands together, striving for some warmth.

Pandora's Vault had no heating commodities. Why would it? It was a prison, not a hotel. Even its Warden had to bend to its will. He didn't have a choice.

The prison was temperamental, or so Sam liked to believe. At times, the halls would be bitterly cold, chilling both the guards and the visitors to the bone. Other days, the scorching heat from the lava defences would seep through the walls, and the structure would turn as hot and sweltering as a desert, with burning metal and sweat dripping down everyone inside. It liked to play tricks on him, that the warden was sure of. He didn't usually mind, unless it involved serious security machinery.

Pandora's Vault was, in other words, Sam's *chef d'oeuvre*, his magnum opus.

All the skills he had amassed throughout his years of redstone studies had allowed him to build the strongest, most indestructible monster anyone had ever seen from the ground up. The Vault stretched far in length, off the coastline, isolated in the water on a man-made island of boulders and earth. It could be glimpsed from miles away, including in the colder regions north of the Greater SMP, where the black rectangle in the distance still sparked fear into everyone's hearts. That said, the burning lights from the four watchtowers were just as useful as any lighthouse for the boats sailing into the harbours.

In a certain way, glimpsing the Vault on your travels meant that you were heading to a safe land. Any nation or kingdom with a prison of that size was bound to easily deal with any bandits or thieves that may run its streets and roads.

That was what many poor, foolish souls thought. The truth couldn't have been any more different.

The SMP was a place of many evils, both locked up tight in cells, minds and the clutches of Death herself, but also running around freely upon its bloodstained earth. The Four Horsemen and other demons had claimed it as their own, equally spreading their woes when they saw fit. A war over there, a burnt crop field here, an infection spreading at an alarming rate and a death toll that could rival entire continents.

Everyone that set foot in the realms became tainted in one way or another, just like every single realm that had the misfortune of being built within its borders.

The prison was no different. Pandora's Vault may have been Sam's masterpiece, but it would always carry a sense of dark dismay when the Warden would wander the corridors. The only thing left to wonder was how long he'd be able to bear it before snapping in two.

Sam's eyes opened again, and his gaze landed on the table in front of him. A flat, round object sat before him, battered lid flipped open on a loose hinge. It was about the size of a human hand and glinted a dull, dirtied shade of gold. The glass lens in the middle was cracked, and the arrow was spinning wildly in a circle, never pointing in the same direction for long.

He let out a shaky breath. The whispers jeered at him.

Getting Tommy's things out of the locker had been hard, both mentally and physically.

Sam had to rewire a few redstone trails and switch off a few complicated gearing systems to manage to, in essence, break into the locked space. There was no way he could get the needed key, seeing as Tommy had put it gods know where. His enderchest, perhaps. In that case, Sam would definitely never see it again.

As for the mentally challenging parts, the Warden managed to get through them with minimal tears and hesitations, removing each of the departed's items carefully; a dagger and its sheath, a satchel full of biscuits, a golden apple, a pair of netherite leg guards, and a leather belt. Sam didn't know what to do with the items he had salvaged. He had considered storing them away safely in a chest somewhere but soon realized that those

items weren't his to keep. He didn't know who he could give them to, or if anyone even wanted to take them. Sam had a feeling that anyone he asked would go for the objects of material value rather than sentimental.

Tommy barely had anyone left.

In the end, he decided to put them back where they belonged; Tommy's old home, a troglodyte hobbit-hole dug into the side of a hill. No one had dared touch the place, out of respect for the boy and the ones who still grieved for him. If anyone did decide to ransack the house and steal anything, then they would have Sam to answer to, and the sweet, homely living quarters of Pandora's Vault to face. That, the Warden swore by.

The only thing he couldn't seem to leave was the compass. Tommy's prized compass, the only glimmer of hope he had in exile. He had shown it to Sam, once, during a moment of heartfelt confession.

"Ghostbur gave this to me when I was in exile," he had explained to him. "It used to point directly towards the White House in L'Manberg. It would tell me where Tubbo was, which way was home, y'know?"

Tommy closed the metal lid with a small snap and flipped it over, tracing the inscription on the back.

Your Tubbo.

"Now that L'Manberg is gone, it just spins in circles. It's lost."

And lost it still was. The arrows spun ceaselessly around and around, again and again. Sam had spent hours just staring at it, lost in thought. He too had been spinning and just like the compass, he didn't know how to stop.

He screwed his eyes shut. "I'm so sorry, Tommy," he murmured. "I'm so sorry..."

He barely acknowledged the whooshing of the portal, followed by footsteps as someone entered the prison.

"Sam?"

The warden refused to rip his eyes away from the compass. He knew the chirpy voice, and he knew that worried voice. He couldn't deal with it right now.

"Bad," he greeted, toneless. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to check on the prison, you know, do my duty as a guard and all."

"Everything is under control."

There was a silence. "Are you sure?"

Sam picked up on Bad's undertone, just like how he had undoubtedly picked up on his. He tensed up, and spoke again, much more coldly. "Yes," he answered sharply.

"Everything is fine."

More footsteps. Bad ventured closer. "Are you alright?" he asked softly, placing a hand on the warden's shoulder.

The arrow was still spinning. Sam shrugged him off, "I'm fine."

"You look tired."

"I've been busy with the Vault. You of all people should know that."

"You need to stop being so stubborn and get some sleep, you muffinhead!"

The warden cracked a small smile, and turned his head up to Bad. His grin quickly faltered when he crossed the demon's gaze.

Bad's eyes were as white and shining as they had always been, but were rimmed with a dark crimson around the edges. His kind smile seemed genuine, though he really could not tell anymore. His hooded cloak was pulled over his head, the once-red stripes and highlights now a pearly white, as if the colour had been completely sucked out of them. The only thing that had stayed a shining red was the large, ruby pendant hanging on a silver chain and a collection of thin thorns and tendrils wrapping around his arms, legs and horns that Sam hadn't noticed before. Against Bad's pitch black body and skin, the white was frightening, and the red tendrils immediately put the warden on edge. He had to summon all of his self-restraint to not leap up and rip them all off his friend.

The Egg cackled, relishing in its masterpiece of a victim. Its own *magnum opus*, or so it teased Sam. The compass' arrow span round and round and round and...

Bad's lips were moving. He was talking.

Sam shook his head, snapping out of it. "What?"

"I said, checking on the prison wasn't the only reason I came here." Bad leaned against the desk, his tail swishing. "I was looking for you."

Sam narrowed his eyes. The last time Bad came "looking for him", it didn't end well. Tommy and Puffy had to risk their own heads to save him. His damaged arm was a reminder of that awful memory.

The whispers in Sam's ears grew louder and louder, gleeful shrills ringing inside his head. He fought the urge to scream and cover his ears. Bad hadn't noticed his discomfort, and continued.

"I've realized that I've changed my priorities recently. The Eggpire is thriving, and we should no longer be concerned. However, we still lack one thing: land."

The Warden jumped in. "The Egg has already taken over our own territory, and even most of the others."

"I know," Bad sighed, a dreamy glint in his eyes. "It's spreading so fast!"

Sam would have accepted any other reply than the wistful comment he got. He forced himself to play along. "Yeah, it's spreading so fast," he echoed with little conviction.

Only a pretense of his own making was left between him and a swift death at the hands of the Egg's disciples. He had to at least try to keep it up. He was doing miserably, if he was being honest.

Tommy would probably laugh and tease him about it, call him a pitiful actor and other choice names before proclaiming that he'd do it flawlessly. Sam would laugh back and indulge him.

He would give anything for that moment to be real.

"But that's not the point, we need to settle unfinished business." Bad reached into the folds of his cloak, and withdrew a large roll of parchment. He rolled it out in front of Sam, revealing a map. "Remember this?"

"I do," Sam replied, oddly nostalgic.

It was an old map of the SMP. L'Manberg was still marked out. Most of the other realms didn't exist when it was drawn up. The borders were few and far between, and drastically different from what they were now. It looked considerably emptier compared to what the land had become now.

Bad pointed out two large plots of land that had been outlined in red ink. One was along the Greater SMP's southern border, a place behind where the imposing stone castle now stood. The other stretched out across the entire northern coastline, just across a thin channel of seawater from where they were both now.

"Remember these parts?"

"Of course, I marked them out myself."

"We're going to finally own them." Bad snatched up the document, and rolled it up. "I've been pulling a few strings recently in the palace, and I've granted us an audience with Eret."

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw the red tendrils snake closer around the demon. He didn't like the implication.

"We've left it for a few months," Bad shrugged, "given Eret a while to lean back into his role and think about it. Now's the perfect time to try again."

Sam furrowed his brow, skeptical. "That doesn't guarantee anything."

"You're right, but this time, we have something much more persuasive than a measly present to give to the king."

"What is it?"

The demon smirked and drew his cape aside. He revealed a small, squirming pouch. Thin strands of blood red vines were reaching out of the top, and had pierced the hard leather, attempting to rip itself out of its restraints. The thorns glimmered dimly in the low light, gnarled and menacing. Every time the warden blinked, he swore the tendrils grew a little more.

The whispers became louder, more erratic, and above all *pleased*.

Sam sucked in a startled breath. He began to stammer something, and looked up at Bad. He hoped that he was wrong, that he was misunderstanding what his friend was saying. It was nothing but wishful thinking.

The demon's eyes were glistening with malice. He grinned, showing off his sharp fangs.

"We have a threat."

Chapter Four: A Royal Demand

"Your Majesty?"

King Eret of the Greater SMP looked up from his writing, peering over the rim of his glasses. One of the heavy oak doors of the throne room had been opened ever so slightly, and a guard poked his head into the hall.

"What is it?" he asked, pen paused right above the paper. A small drop of ink fell from the nib, staining the museum plans underneath.

"You have visitors."

"Visitors?" The monarch put his work down. "I don't recall anyone asking for an audience."

"They seem pretty insistent," the guard replied, casting a nervous look behind him.

"They?"

"There are three of them, Your Majesty."

Eret hesitated for a moment, then sighed. He sauntered over to his golden throne. He sat down, his back cushioned by deliciously plush, red velvet. He picked up his crown from his seat's armrest and placed it on top of his head. His curly, dusty brown hair peeked out from under the golden headpiece. It was still as heavy as all the other times he had worn it. The rainbow jewels glittered in the light, casting multicoloured shadows across the wooden floor.

"Send them in. If they've come far to see me, I have no intention of turning them away."

The guard nodded, and stepped fully into the room. He stood up straight, and bellowed. "The Red Duke, the Marquis, and the Warden," he announced.

At the mention of the titles, Eret's warm, welcoming demeanor fell, and his muscles tensed up. He sat up straight in his throne, joining the ranks of frozen statues that lined the great walls of his palace.

"Show them in," he demanded, his tone bitter.

The oak doors to the throne room banged open, and the Badlands strode in.

The three visitors had intended to make an impression on the king and anyone in the vicinity, with attire so intricate and fine it would be enough to make the gods themselves seethe with jealousy.

The Red Duke was dressed in multiple shades of red and gold, a crimson cape hooked over his right shoulder. The hood that usually covered his head was off for the occasion, and instead replaced by a high collared, wine red waistcoat and white linen shirt. Silver chains and ruby jewels fell in cascades around his neck, and his black horns were laced with fine golden filigree. All trace of the Egg's vines had been removed or carefully hidden.

The Warden was definitely the most battle worthy out of the three. A shining, polished ceremonial suit of golden armour glinted off his body, encrusted with decorative gems and precious stones. A green cloak sat around his shoulders, weaved with hints of shining emerald green and trimmed with soft, white fur. His dark eyes gleamed. A golden crown sat on top of his head, set with rubies and polished garnets.

He held his silvery blue trident in his hand, as always, and tried to keep himself calm and collected. He glanced across to Antfrost.

The Marquis was a little underdressed compared to his companions, though that did not mean he was any less resplendent. Simply dressed in sky blue and silver attire, the cat's sleek, cream and brown fur was perfectly groomed, glittering with hints of silver and white. His long tail swung elegantly from side to side, and his sapphire, oval eyes blinked slowly.

The sun shining through the tall, narrow windows of the throne room made the visitors stand out even more, an array of ruby, gold and silver light spots dancing along the floor as the three leaders made their way to the king.

Even if Sam was not fooled, it certainly seemed that Eret was—at least in part. He must have only been impressed by the amount of work put into the glittering parade itself, the farce. He still kept his head high, with a show of dignity that Sam respected immensely.

Their previous meetings with the King of the Greater SMP had been informal, for lack of a better word. Today however, the Badlands had pulled out all the stops, which only confirmed the importance of the possible demands they were here to discuss.

The wrinkle at the corners of Eret's eyes told the warden he had already somewhat guessed what they were here about.

"Your Highness, how good to see you again!" Bad smiled brightly.

He didn't bow, and either did Antfrost. Only Sam deigned to dip down on one knee.

Eret raised an eyebrow. "I never thought I'd hear those titles again."

They were, of course, meaningless; just some of the many Eret had frantically handed out to any and all potential threats to his throne in his first few days as king. They were landless ones, and just enough to gain some powerful warriors' favours and support. Most of them were delighted and even stayed in the Greater SMP's court. Only three had taken them and ran off, swiping snippets of land from under the monarch's nose as they went and founding their own nation.

Bad kept his smile. "We thought it would be appropriate."

"It would have been if you were still part of the Greater SMP. As I recall, I was the one who bestowed them upon you."

"With all due respect," Antfrost mewled, stepping next to Bad. "A rank is a rank, and should be recognized."

"Not necessarily," Eret replied, his tone still as cold as ever, "it depends which soil you are on."

Ant didn't back down, foolishly so in Sam's opinion. Insulting the monarch whose land they were on was a bad move.

"L'Manberg recognized you as a king," the cat reminded Eret.

"But recognized me as a traitor on their own land."

"You *did* betray them," the cat continued.

Eret and Sam bristled, both of them taken aback by the attack on the king's honour. "Everyone knows the story," Eret muttered through gritted teeth. "I would appreciate it if that part of history was left in the past, where it belongs."

"Many people have tried to erase and forget stuff like that," Ant warned, his whiskers twitching. "It rarely works."

Eret stood up angrily. "What do you want?"

Bad stepped in. "Please forgive him," he apologized. "He's just very excited."

"Excited? Excited for what?"

"The potential deal we can make," the demon continued, clapping his hands together.

The king sank down onto his throne again. "I see," he said. He looked at the three of them in turn. "A deal."

"Exactly." Bad agreed with a nod.

Eret leaned back, watching them all with a narrowed eye. "I already have my answer," he told them sternly.

The demon laughed. "That was quick. You don't even know what we want from you."

"I can guess quite easily." The monarch gestured to the roll of parchment in Ant's hand. "The answer is no."

"Eret, I don't think you understand why we need this," Bad tutted. "Why are you so hesitant?"

"I'm extremely cautious with all my decisions."

"What are you scared of, Your Majesty?"

"I'm not scared. I'm trying to look after my nation."

"Well so are we! What do you have to lose by helping us?"

"That's the thing," the king replied, "I don't know yet, and I don't know what I have to win either."

Everything was derailing faster than a redstone contraption going haywire. Sam walked in front of his companions, and stood in front of the throne. He bowed again, attempting to soften the mood with another much needed show of respect towards to their equal.

"Your Highness," he began, eyes down.

Eret returned Sam's greeting and tilted his head, a small smile breaking through. Sam stood at ease.

"You didn't keep your title," the king noted a hint of surprise in his tone.

"I didn't," he agreed. "I just found the Warden was more fitting nowadays."

"Of course."

"We're not here to discuss titles."

He took the rolled up map from Ant. He walked over to the nearby workspace, stacking the mess on it to one side, and rolled out the parchment. He beckoned the king over.

Eret stayed put. "I already know what the Badlands is asking for."

"That's not the point," Sam protested. "We don't necessarily want the land. We *need* it."

"Is your own territory not big enough for you?"

The word "territory" was spoken with disdain, in the voice of a monarch who still didn't recognize the Badlands as their own independent nation. That always sparked a nerve in Sam.

"I don't think you understand," the warden muttered through gritted teeth. "Your protector destroyed an entire nation."

"Dream is no longer my protector. I am the sole ruler of the SMP. He has no influence on my decisions anymore. You of all people should know that."

"He destroyed L'Manberg!" Sam reminded him, deciding to focus on the root of the problem. "He wiped out an entire nation! Where do you think the people of L'Manberg escaped to after their home was destroyed?"

"Ah, I see." Eret propped his head up on his elbow.

"A majority of the L'Manbergians have started to settle themselves in the Badlands," Sam continued. "We've tried to help them with what we have and with what we can salvage, but we can only do so much."

That was true. Sam had spent the couple of weeks following L'Manberg's Doomsday doing rounds around the refugee camps set up in the Badlands and providing anything they could spare; blankets, fresh food, any tools. Sam was horrified every time he encountered a new, injured face. The sick were scorched and scarred by third degree burns, amputated limbs, and the trauma they all carried with them. Few were in fit condition to work. That was alright, though. Sam wanted nothing in return for the kindness he showed the refugees.

But what had hit Sam the most were the children. The youngest were starving and joyless, curled up in their parents' laps and trying to drift off into peaceful slumbers, only to be woken up by the cries of an agonizing, dying soul or their own nightmares about the green monster with the white, smiling mask. The children were the wariest of the Warden when he came to help them, retreating into the shadows or hiding beside their mothers and fathers whenever he darkened their doorsteps. Their parents had undoubtedly threatened to send them to Pandora's Vault when they misbehaved, with no one for company but the brute of a Warden that built it.

What probably started out as a harmless, disciplinary tale to keep turbulent toddlers in check soon became a nightmarish reality. It broke Sam's heart, and he tried everything in his power to earn their trust.

It took the children a while, but they eventually warmed up to him, namely when they realized that he wasn't going to drag them off to the prison. Soon enough, Sam's visits became the highlight of the week for many. He told them stories, played with them, and answered any questions they wanted to throw at him. He however did draw the line at letting them use his trident, although the worried shrieks from parents and older siblings alike were enough to deter any younger kids from begging to hold it.

Sometimes—if he could manage to sneak undetected past the watchful eyes of the Eggpire—Tommy came along to help.

The people of his old nation mostly welcomed him with a smile and a space beside the fire, treating him as the war hero he had proven to be multiple times. That said, quite a few still held him in contempt, grumbling and musing about the days he was exiled. In true Tommy fashion, the boy ignored their insults, and tried to focus on anything he could help with. He was known for being lazy, a fact Sam could vouch for, but when it came to trying to make amends for his actions and mistakes towards L'Manberg, he

would clearly do anything. He was trying to do one last good thing for his beloved nation, and Sam never realized how much of a toll it had taken on him until one night.

"Is all this my fault?"

Sam had looked up suddenly when Tommy whispered his question. They were both watching over one of the camps for a night, one that was filled with sick and suffering victims while their healers took a well deserved rest. All the patients were sleeping soundly, to everyone's relief. They had seated themselves beside the roaring fire, watching the smoke curl up out of the logs and into the night sky. Tommy had his head down, poking the smouldering ashes with a stick, while Sam cradled a young girl on his lap. She was wrapped up in his dark green cloak for warmth, her frail frame held gently by the warden. The burns and scars on her face were healing slowly but surely, and her breathing was regular, if only a little raspy. She slept soundly.

Sam had dragged his eyes away from the poor child, and turned to Tommy. "What is?"

"All this." He gestured to the poor souls around them. "All this pain..."

Sam had been quick to jump in and defend the boy. "How could it be? How could any of this be your fault?"

"If I only stayed in exile, if only I let Dream keep my discs, y'know?" He shrugged, defeated. "There would have been no reason to destroy L'Manberg."

Sam placed a reassuring hand on Tommy's shoulder. "None of this is your fault. What happened would have probably happened anyway, with or without you there."

"But it happened when I *was* there..."

"That wouldn't have made a difference," Sam stated with a heavy heart. He had had a feeling whatever he said would make no difference in Tommy's mind.

Tommy nodded slowly, still a little unconvinced. He poked the fire again. "Thanks, Sam," he mumbled, shuffling a little closer to him.

"Thanks for what?"

"Trying to help," he whispered. He leaned against his shoulder. "Thanks."

Sam had gently drawn his free arm around the boy, holding him closer. He smiled softly.

Unfortunately, the samaritan visits became less and less frequent as time moved on, as Sam began to avoid certain areas. Bad and Ant had been doing their own rounds, but instead of offering material help and supplies, they preached the wonders of the red tendrils slowly snaking around the fields, and claimed that anything the lost and the broken could ever want could and would be provided by the Egg. They only had to stop and listened to it.

Sam was certain that the people of L'Manberg would reject the hoax, but he was wrong. Many poor souls longed for something to believe and trust in, and the promise of to vanquish of all their worldly ailments drew them in to accept the crimson whispers. Soon enough, entire communities turned to the Eggpire. Those who resisted were few and far apart, and Sam couldn't bear to watch the tendrils invade the already desperate people.

That was why the warden felt so strongly about needing the territory the Badlands were asking for. It wasn't for power or military purposes. They needed it to help people.

"We need more farmland," Sam continued, staring into Eret's eyes, "and spaces to build adequate homes. Not for us, but for our people. The Badlands aren't as evil and self-centred as you may think."

"I wasn't thinking that, actually," Eret corrected him, "but you must know that the Greater SMP needs that land as well. The people of L'Manberg have also been seeking refuge here."

"You already have the farms and homes," the warden pointed out.

"Which are barely enough to house and feed everyone. Maybe if you cleared those growths, you'd rediscover some useful space."

"Oh no, we could never get rid of those!" Ant jumped in, appalled.

"How come?"

"We just can't!"

"Is it a strength problem? I could send over a garrison to help, if you'd—"

"That won't be necessary," Bad interrupted. "The tendrils have nothing to do with this. All we're asking for is the land we desire, then we'll leave you alone."

King Eret paused, deep in thought. Sam could almost hear his mind whirring as he leaned forwards, brow furrowed.

"Please don't think your reasoning has fallen on deaf ears," he assured them in a softer tone of voice. He nodded in Sam's direction. "Your intentions are good, and I certainly respect that. But I have to put the Greater SMP before all else, and we need that land for the same reason as you do. Perhaps we could compromise?"

"Compromise?" Bad repeated, narrowing his eyes.

"I could give you half."

Sam's eyes lit up. "Half?" he echoed in awe, the prospect too perfect to be true.

The king nodded, "That sounds reasonable enough."

More than reasonable, in fact. Truly, there was no end to King Eret's generosity. However, it was clear that Sam's fellow companions weren't as open to the deal as he was himself.

"Half? Half of what we're asking for?"

"That's what I said, yes."

Bad scowled. "Are there any other options?"

The monarch hesitated. "You could rejoin the Greater SMP, for everyone's sake."

Bad trembled furiously, a growl rising within his throat. "The Badlands are our home, and we won't give it up for anything."

Ant mewled in approval, and turned his piercing gaze up to Eret. Even Sam had to agree with them and held his head high and defiantly.

"Heed my advice, Bad," Eret warned. "Independent nations seeking recognition and revolution never have a happy ending around here."

"Are you threatening us?"

"I'm only stating the facts. History isn't kind to its people."

"It sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"Bad," Sam called from across the room. "Just think for a moment. Half is more than good. Let's take the land we've been offered and leave."

"That would be an insult," Bad snapped back, then spoke to the king once more. "I think we're both deeply sorry for wasting each other's time."

Without waiting for an answer, he spun on his heels and marched out of the throne room, muttering to himself. Antfrost soon followed, his dark brown tail flicking angrily from side to side, his ears plastered against his head.

Sam screwed his eyes shut, inhaling his frustration. Silently, he collected the map off the table and also prepared to storm out. Eret stopped him.

"Sam."

The Warden turned around.

"How have you been holding up?"

His pale, mother-of-pearl gaze was gentle and caring, something Sam didn't expect after their confrontation. He removed his crown, set it down on his knees and smiled at him.

"Perfectly fine," Sam grumbled with no intention to reveal anything else.

"Did the burial go smoothly?" The king's tone was hesitant, and he fumbled with the crown between his fingers.

"You would know if you were there."

"Tommy wouldn't have wanted me to attend. You know that."

"How would I know?"

"You were close to him, weren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

One more probe into his private life, and he would offer the king no more respect.

"You're wearing his compass," Eret pointed out.

Sam automatically closed his hand around it. Against the shiny armour and jewels he was wearing, the battered, dirty gold compass stood out like a sore thumb.

"I'm going to give it to Tubbo when I see him," he lied. "He cared about Tommy a lot."

Eret opened his mouth to say something more, but Sam interrupted him, coldly.

"As Bad said, we're sorry for wasting your time."

With those final words, he left.

"What the fuck was *that*, Bad?"

The Badlands were walking back across the castle courtyard, down to the guard towers marking the entrance. Bad took the lead, side-eyeing the staff that looked his way. Ant was busy trying to pry the blue contacts from his eyes out with his claws, revealing the ruby red underneath.

And Sam was fuming.

"Language," Bad sighed. "What was what?"

"Eret was kind enough to offer us *half* of the land we needed! *Half*!"

The castle staff who passed them by shot them odd looks, and the three visitors quickly hurried along their way. The path dipped down under a stone arch. Guards paced the ramparts above, admiring the view and casting occasional glances down to the drawbridge.

"He didn't offer us what we wanted," the demon sniffed, keeping his gaze locked on an invisible point in the distance.

"It would have still been enough for the people of L'Manberg! We needed at least *one* of those bits of territory!"

"It's better to try for all than settling for half. We tried for all, and it failed."

"There was no shame in taking the offer."

"As Eret would say; it was never meant to be. Though I have to admire your quick thinking, Sam." Bad smiled at him, and gave him a small pat on the back. "Using the L'Manbergians to try and sow seeds of guilt into Eret's head was a smart move. It almost worked."

Using? His hand tightened around his trident, his eyes burning with rage.

It *wasn't* some sort of ploy, as Bad had implied. He truly cared. He wanted to help the people who had lost everything. His reasoning to the monarch was genuine. He wondered why his friends couldn't see that.

Then he remembered.

They were blinded to anything but the Egg.

The Warden stopped in his tracks. "I thought we had equal leadership."

"Huh?"

Bad and Ant stopped walking too.

Sam straightened his spine. "When we formed the Badlands, all three of us had an equal say in everything. That still holds up, as far as I know." He pointed back to the palace. "So I say we go back in there, apologize and negotiate."

The demon and the cat shared a look.

"Fine," Bad agreed. "We'll vote on it. All in favour of going back to compromise with Eret?"

Sam raised his hand.

"And all those in favour of rejecting that decision and trying to find another, better way to get what we want?"

Bad and Ant raised their hands. Sam glared at Ant, the only one he thought still had some sense. The cat gave him a sheepish shrug.

"Then it's decided," the demon said, lowering his arm. "We try again another time."

Sam opened his mouth to protest, but he was stopped.

"We voted on it; you can't get more fair than that. I admire your commitment to the task, Sam, but the Eggpire needs to think a little bigger now, much bigger than what we would have previously done in the past."

"I thought the land we wanted was to expand the Badlands," the Warden said.

"The Eggpire and the Badlands are one and the same now, are they not?"

Not to Sam.

Never to Sam.

They never would be.

They stepped off the drawbridge and left through the castle gate. Before they stepped onto the Prime Path, Bad stopped for a second. Ant and Sam waited for him a couple of steps in front.

The demon snatched the leather pouch around his belt, and ripped his hand away as something pricked his skin. He held one of his fingers up to the light. Sam watched as a droplet of dark grey blood swelled at the tip. Bad sucked on it quickly to slow the flow, then unhooked and tossed the bag into a nearby bush growing along the castle walls. None of the guards on any of the parapets had appeared to have noticed anything.

Sam watched in dismay as the newly freed tendrils and spores slowly crawled and latched themselves onto the bush's branches and leaves like blood-sucking, crimson leeches. He cast a look to the cat beside him. Antfrost was watching the spectacle with eyes full of gleeful pleasure.

The Egg seemed remarkably pleased with that as well. Its hisses bubbled in his ears like champagne.

Only Sam had the sane conscience to loath every part of it.

Bad rejoined them a moment later. "We've made our point," he said, hurrying along the path. "Let's go."

Chapter Five: Affections

My love,

It feels like years since I've last held a letter of yours in my hands. Written news travels so slowly these days, and I don't think I can take it any more. I'm glad to hear that you are alright. Rumours of wars and tensions reach me faster than letters and packages. The

sudden destruction of L'Manberg has shocked many far past your borders. Even the mighty warriors that visit the bakery are quaking at the very mention of Doomsday.

Rumours have also reached me concerning something a lot more serious. Red tendrils have apparently been growing in and around the Greater SMP, and fear rises in the nations across the oceans. Everyone's calling it a red infection. No one seems to confirm or deny if these are all just drunken tavern talk, but I hope dearly for your sake that they are only tall tales. People are convinced it could spread further. I don't know what to say or think. Everyone's scared, and I'd be dumb to disagree with them. The only thing that will push me to venture over the oceans to the SMP is the knowledge that you'll be there, like you promised. I trust you, Ant, and if you say life is truly better where you are, I trust you wholeheartedly. All I wish to know is that you are safe and well.

Planning my journey is taking longer than I expected, with a few setbacks that may push it back another few months or so. This is the third time it's happened. At this point, I'm ready to believe that a god is messing with me and to that, I say "fuck them". Nothing will be able to keep me from you. I'll make my way across eventually, I promise, but I can't rely on anything or anyone. All I feel like I can count on is your undying affection and trust. I wish you nothing but the best, and send you the hope that I will join you one day.

With all my affection and heart,

Your Velvet

My love,

You have no idea how happy your recent letters have made me. That proves that at least someone's doing their job around here, even if the post is belated. The sea captains are a lot more reluctant these days, but I managed to persuade one to take a couple of letters across when he left. I was scared he was going to throw them overboard the first chance he got, but it seems like he kept his side of the bargain.

Doomsday was a tragic day, but one that has ultimately saved many people. Especially those of L'Manberg themselves who were swallowed by their desire for conquest and superiority, going as far as betraying their own. When their first president and general, Wilbur Soot, started it all, it used to be a nation of peace and prosperity, built on ideals of freedom and democracy. Unfortunately, it never healed from Schlatt's rule, and President

Tubbo, if anything, couldn't save anything or anyone even if he tried. And he tried. It was unavoidable, in the end. It had to end.

The shadows it carried were too dark and stormy, and while its destruction was a tragedy, it was necessary to conserve peace with its surrounding nations. That said, I am relieved you were not here to witness the battle. It was brutal, perhaps even more so than November 16th.

Oh, and the so-called "red infection" everyone's panicking about. As they say, rumours change drastically with distance. In truth, the crimson growths and spores are not considered a hindrance. Our lives have clearly been bettered since their arrival and I'm certain that once you see them for yourself, you will feel the same way.

My love, not a day goes by when I do not think of you. The ocean waves keeping me from you seems like a cruel attempt at breaking us apart. It hurts my heart. I promise that one day we see each other again and we shall never be dragged apart by fate again. My heart and soul are taken only by you, and it shall always stay that way. You are my everything.

With all my love,

Your Ant

The parchment crinkled satisfyingly between his claws, and caressed his soft fur. His own, freshly written letter lay a little to the side, the black ink drying slowly in the cold, cavern air. He bent his muzzle down to the note he held, inhaling the scent. Under the tinge of sea salt, stuck to it thanks to long weeks at sea, a hint of cherry and freshly baked bread reached his nostrils.

A few more months. Two months had seemed like an eternity to wait so long ago. Now the delay kept getting bigger and vaguer, and he didn't know how he was still sane enough to function. Hadn't they both waited long enough?

Parting had been painful for the both of them. The cat remembered the day well.

The sky had been shining a bright blue all day, fluffy white clouds drifting lazily across it. Flocks of seagulls screeched at the top of their lungs, circling and skirting the high masts and sails jutting up into the sky. Loud, ringing bells and idle chatter filled their local docks as sailors dashed around, either returning from or preparing to embark on a

journey. The dual scents of fish and sea salt filled nostrils constantly, perhaps a little too much. Ant had sneezed many a time.

Velvet readjusted his overcoat for him. "I knew that someday that your obsession with wild animals would drag you away," he sighed with a small grin.

The cat purred in amusement. "It's only for two months. It's not forever."

"Two months *feels* like forever to me," Velvet replied, with his bright smile dimming to a saddened one.

"I know it will... Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"Someone needs to look after the bakery."

"Are you sure you won't accidentally burn it down?" Ant teased, earning him a quick swipe to his muzzle. His ears twitched.

Velvet chuckled. "You really don't trust me, do you?" he sighed in mock-despair. "I'm not the one going to live on my own in the mountains for who knows how long!"

"Not just the mountains, I'm planning to head to a desert and a jungle too!"

He faltered, losing himself in Velvet's shining aquamarine eyes, his cherry red hair basking gently in the coastal wind. Ant's heart melted.

"Do you promise to write to me, every day?" Velvet pleaded. "Even if I don't read them until you come back?"

"Of course, as long as you promise to do the same."

"I promise."

Their hands entwined, their shining silver rings glinting in the sunlight. Velvet pressed his forehead to Ant's and closed his eyes, breathing in deeply.

"I'll miss you..."

Ant leaned in, and placed a gentle, honey sweet kiss on Velvet's lips. "So will I..."

A loud, brass bell pulled them both out of their reverie, and they spun around. On the edge of the pier, the ship's captain stared at the couple, regularly checking his pocket watch and tapping his foot impatiently. Ant nodded to him, and turned back to Velvet.

"I have to go," he whispered. He quickly checked the bag swinging at his side. The notebooks and pencils were still inside, and he closed it again.

"Goodbye," Velvet whispered back, pressing a kiss to Ant's furry cheek.

Their hands had unlatched with immense difficulty, and Ant had kept his sapphire gaze trained on his lover the whole way; up the walkway, onto the deck, and even when they began to sail. He had never dragged his eyes away, until his ship was far away and the night's sky had risen hours later.

Time had flown by so fast. Too fast.

The letter was snatched out of his paw. Antfrost let out a small, breathy hiss and made a move to grab it, claws out. The tendril held it high above him, taunting. It curled around the parchment, crumpling it before tossing it aside. A large glowing flower turned its head to the ball and like a fly trap, snapped its budded head at it. In a matter of moments, Velvet's letter was gone. Ant watched on, dismay rising within him.

The cavern was dark, though it was far from empty. Red vines and thorns had taken over every available bit of rock and stone, even going so far as hanging down from the ceiling and curling around old mining supplies. Tendrils of different lengths and thicknesses layered the floor or cambered up the walls, holding twisted positions only statues made out of the sturdiest of materials could. Everything around him was a different shade of red, except for a few small patches of glowing, orange flowers, and some larger flytrap-like specimens. There was no light in the cave, save for the thousands of ghostly, floating spores that moved and glittered like fireflies. They drifted lazily around, landing delicately on whatever they touched, and only to fly away once more when the slightest movement was made.

It was enchanting at first sight: a crimson and blood red wonderland haunted by mysterious glowing plants. But once one came to know what was really afoot, many came to regard the thorned jungle with dread. Antfrost sniffed the air, and watched the spores twinkle around him like the night sky. His scarlet eyes were wide open in awe, and his hand subconsciously rubbed the silver band on his ring finger. The sapphire that was encrusted into the top of it had turned a rich shade of wine.

His tail knocked the ink pot. It fell to the floor, shattering into pieces. The ink was soon sucked up by the plants layered below him. His own, handwritten letter stayed next to him, the corners lifted up by the soft underground breeze.

Do you not trust me, Antfrost?

His name was uttered like an insult, a threat. The Egg knew his name, and it knew he was here in its underground domain. He could do nothing but obey.

He nodded, in a trance. "I do." he replied, lips dry.

Do you not wish to serve me?

"I do."

Your mind is torn, I can feel it.

The cat paused before answering. His claws dug deep into the palms of his hands.

On one hand, he had the urge to pour his heart out to the whispers. They knew him like no one else did. They would understand him. On the other, he would have preferred to suffer in silence. The memory of Velvet was the only thing of his he still felt like he could hold onto.

"You promised you could give me anything," he mewed.

That is true, the whispers agreed courteously.

Ant's voice cracked. "Then why haven't you brought me Velvet yet?"

The tamed whispers erupted into a void of screaming chaos, screeching in betrayal. Yet the answer was calm and composed in the midst of all the agitation.

Only those who aren't genuine and trustworthy rush to claim their prize. Everything will come in due time, Antfrost.

Velvet was right, in part. There was indeed a godly force messing with his journey.

Something creaked and shuddered beside him. Before Ant realized what was happening, a mass of red leaves grew over his letter. He tried to clear them and retrieve the page, only to realize when he did that it was gone.

Just a little more time, and you will get your dearest to join you. You seem fond of him.

Antfrost couldn't contain the soft purr rumbling in his throat. "I am..." He smiled. "I love him."

And you love me, don't you?

This time, Ant's reply was a lot more harsh, yet no less enthusiastic. "I do."

Almost all thoughts of Velvet faded from his mind, from his deep adoration to the melancholy of losing his letter. It was all replaced by a strange and painful euphoria coloured ruby and crimson. His look hardened, his brow furrowed and his claws unsheathed. His tail flicked back and forth.

He turned to gaze at the back of the cavern, red eyes and pointed ears alert. The spores followed his wake, drifting over and illuminating something large sitting at the other end, drowned in obscurity. Its shiny, marbled surface was basked in dim orange light. Its silhouette was only vaguely visible from afar. The spores landed on the surface in clumps, forming almost eye-like spots on the mass.

It was watching him. It always had been, ever since the first whisper slithered its way into his mind. Its gaze only grew more present and more profound as time went on. Antfrost had never known such a more beautifully oppressive stare, one that could tear him apart with ease and feast on anything it wanted.

He couldn't break from it even if he tried. It was an addiction he could never solve.

He loved it.

He adored it beyond reason and rhyme.

The Egg's words of wisdom that came next echoed ominously around the cave. It was pleased.

"One lover at a time, Marquis."

Chapter Six: Again

Every realm had its fair share of legends and myths. An enchanted forest here, a haunted castle there, a mythical man or monster who may or may not have existed at some point in the past.

Most of them were simply tall tales, an attempt at glorifying the slightest pebble or a blip in time with no sensible explanation to be found in archives or memory. Any nation with so much as a puddle of miracle water had assured themselves a steady stream of baffled tourists and pilgrims from whom they reaped riches and trade opportunities galore.

But quite a few of them were in fact very much real. Trustworthy and proven records of falling stars and cursed tombs were scattered throughout the history books, and the magic of alchemy was very often used in everyday affairs. Enchanted armour and weapons, although rare, existed. Even species often brushed aside as nothing but stories by the inhabitants of the Old World—avians, fireborns, minotaurs and animal hybrids—roamed the streets and lived ordinary lives.

Among all of those small snippets of fantasy, however, there were the greats of the greats. Men and beasts who accomplished the impossible, the ones who haunted dreams and nightmares alike, were very much real and alive. They walked the same earth and wielded the same weapons, although with a lot more dexterity, strength and super abilities that others could only wish they possessed.

How did Ranboo know that?

Well, quite simply, he was living with one of them.

Technoblade was a monster of a piglin, to put it lightly. He was freakishly tall, for one; a hulking mass of pure muscle, thick fur and unrivaled strength. It was a frame even the bastion brutes from the Nether would envy. He would be able to take out ten of them with a single punch alone. He probably already had.

His snout and face was marred with numerous, deep scars that crisscrossed and betrayed his dangerous, battle-hardened past, striking fear into any and all that had the misfortune of crossing his path.

His legend was a ruthless one. He had burnt kingdoms down to the ground, he had massacred armies, he was the bane of the greedy and the weak who got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was not one to be crossed, and those who dared to paid the price. L'Manberg's crumbling ruins attested to that fact all too well.

Few actually managed to make up their minds about where his morals lay. Among his rivers of bloodshed, small sprouts of good were scattered and had grown decently, feeding off the pain and woe. Some might even say that a few even grew so much they drained the evil completely, although it was never gone for long. Whether his good deeds excused his bad was questionable, and was a query that was very often swept under the rug and forgotten by all.

His presence in many people's minds was only directly influenced by what he did in front of their own eyes. In the SMP, he was often an object of mass scrutiny, hailed as a hero one moment and hunted as a villain the next.

Everyone was, in their own way, but Technoblade was seen as a prize of sorts. If you were his friend, you were virtually untouchable; if you were his enemy, merely grazing him with the tip of your sword would secure you a fine reputation for years to come.

Despite it all, he had still managed to make Ranboo feel at home in the tundra. Sometimes, though, the hybrid found his mentor's attitude just as indecisive as the probability of snow storms that very same day.

Especially when it came to training with him.

"You're too slow."

The battle-axe was heaved out of the ground beside Ranboo.

He sighed, defeated, and adjusted his cape. "I'm sorry..."

Ranboo got back onto his feet. Technoblade snorted, wisps of warm breath curling out of his nostrils. The short, deep semblance of a scoff he let out rumbled like a dragon's growl.

"You will be when your head gets chopped off," he grunted, wiping his blade clean of wet snow. He raised the weapon again, stomping back into a stance.

Ranboo grabbed his sword from the floor. He planted both of his feet firmly into the ground, and held the handle firmly between both hands. The sharp netherite blade of his sword shone in the bright sunlight, as did the crisp white snow blanketing the world around them. He took a few steps back.

There was something about the way the piglin wielded the insanely heavy weapon that struck fear straight into Ranboo. Techno made it look so easy, almost weightless, yet his

murderous blades were heavier than Ranboo's own weight in gold whenever he tried to hold them.

"Ready?"

Ranboo nodded earnestly, knuckles tightening around the hilt of his sword. "Ready."

He waited for Techno to give him a starting indicator. A simple "go" would have done the trick.

The piglin said nothing. Before Ranboo could react, Technoblade had already lunged at him. Ranboo leapt to the side just in time. The battle-axe fell straight down, landing in the spot where Ranboo was standing mere moments ago. It cut through the icy ground like a knife through soft butter.

Ranboo took the opportunity to try and destabilize his opponent. He rammed into Techno's side, trying to knock him over. He grossly underestimated the piglin's weight and strength.

The impact was sharp, and dazed Ranboo. His shoulder throbbed. He stumbled backwards, his swordsman's grip and defensive stance slackening. Technoblade wasted no time in abandoning his axe, drawing out his sword instead. Ranboo barely managed to block the first swing, his arms shaking. Techno swung again.

This time, Ranboo was prepared—somewhat. Their swords crashed together. The piglin pushed, grunting, but the hybrid held strong.

Technoblade leapt away with surprising agility and spun around. His long and heavily fur trimmed cape billowed out behind him, whipping Ranboo's face and blinding him momentarily. Ranboo tripped over his own feet and fell backwards. The blanket of thick snow broke his fall.

He dropped his sword. Techno kicked it away and stood over him, one heavy boot on his chest and the tip of his own sword pressed into his black and white neck. Ranboo panted and gulped. The heavy ball in his throat bulged against the steel tip. With a heavy and reluctant heart, he admitted his defeat.

Technoblade's snout curved into a warm smile, and he lifted the foot from the other's chest.

"It was a good attempt," he said, holding out his hand to help Ranboo up and giving him an encouraging pat on the back, "just not good enough."

"If you want to defeat me, train for another three hundred years." his young trainee quoted dutifully, brushing himself off and sighing. "I know."

Techno readjusted his own outfit, and put his sword away. "Exactly," he hummed, satisfied.

"Then *why* are we doing this?"

"Because you need to learn. Your attempt at knocking me over was a good idea," he grunted, the cold façade of a serious mentor returning once again. "However..." He gave Ranboo a "light" shove, knocking him into a more rooted stance. It was enough to make the hybrid fall backwards again. "If you do try that, make sure your opponent is smaller than you."

"I figured," Ranboo muttered, rubbing his aching shoulder.

"You're improving."

Ranboo shrugged. "Great," he thanked, without conviction.

"Let's try that again."

Again, again, again.

That's all Ranboo had been hearing for the past four hours. When Technoblade had graciously taken him in, the hybrid knew that there would be some sort of training involved. He just never expected it to be so intense.

He thought he'd be used to it by now, but he still felt the strain on his body. His long limbs were aching and shaking, and his head had started spinning a couple of times. The tundra around them, if anything, had made the challenge even harder. Their feet sank into the ground and blizzards regularly whipped up out of nowhere.

His boots—and the rest of his clothes, in fact—were soaked through, and now his feet were sopping wet. Each step became a sodden, frozen squelch that made him shiver uncomfortably. Ranboo definitely preferred a snowstorm to a rainfall, but he didn't enjoy it interfering with his fighting as he frantically tried to claim at least one victory against one of the most powerful warriors anyone had ever seen.

His eyes lingered longingly on the couple of snowy stone and log lodges in the distance. Warm, white smoke curled out of the chimneys.

A window opened wide, and Philza poked his head out, placing a steaming hot platter on the sill. More smoke curled up from the food, and he gently blew on it. The delicious smell of baked potatoes wafted towards them.

Phil looked at the two warriors training, and gave them a small smile and a happy wave from afar. A couple of crows landed on the edge of the platter, their long, sharp beaks pecking at the food. Phil shooed them away with the back of his hand. The birds cawed angrily, rising back into the sky to squawk the details of their indignant adventure to the rest of their murder.

A strange sensation pooled in Ranboo's stomach. He couldn't exactly explain it. Seeing Phil acting so normal was odd to him. Everything in his world seemed to be going fine, as if nothing had changed.

It was almost as if the tragedy of the past week or so was merely a hallucination.

Ranboo wasn't angry. He could never be angry at Philza. The avian had been there for him so many times. He was a good friend and second mentor to Ranboo. No, not anger, but just as strong and just as draining.

It was disappointment.

Ranboo was more than ready to quit on the spot, chuck down his weapons and leave the training ground. He glanced over at Techno. He wondered if the piglin was as fed up with today's training as he was. Perhaps he should ask if they could stop and retreat into the warmth of their homes. There was a high chance Techno would agree, if his loud, growling stomach was any indication.

"Ranboo."

He snapped to attention. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I know you're defective in the memory department," Technoblade sighed, leaning on the handle of his battle-axe, "but damn. You need a longer attention span."

"I'm sorry. I... I'm a little preoccupied."

"Preoccupied?"

"With Tommy."

"Right, Tommy." Techno's eyes narrowed. "Too preoccupied to bother learning to fight? Snap out of it."

Tears welled up at the corner of Ranboo's eyes. He screwed them shut, trying to drown out his emotions. He wasn't ready to heal, and he was far from moving on. He also didn't need Techno to see him cry and give him a more than biased lecture about Tommy's many unforgivable sins.

He had no right to.

He had *no right* to.

"Again."

Techno's voice rang in his head. The hybrid's eyes snapped open again. He glared at the piglin.

"Fine." He drew his sword. "Again. I'm ready."

Technoblade took his place, and stood still. Ranboo did the same. They lingered, unmoving, for quite a while. They were each waiting for the other to make the first move.

Eventually, the piglin grunted, rolling his eyes, and leapt forwards. Ranboo prepared to leap to the side, expecting his opponent to try and bring the battle-axe down like he had many times before. What he didn't count on was Techno suddenly changing his tactic.

Instead of clobbering the blade straight down, Technoblade swung it sideways, heading straight for Ranboo's abdomen.

A sudden panic took hold of Ranboo's entire body. It was coloured purple, and blinded every single one of his senses.

He couldn't see anything under the heavy violet haze that had descended over his vision. He couldn't feel anything, either. His sword was weightless in his grasp. His soaked clothes were nothing but air.

All he could sense and make out was that he had suddenly popped up behind Technoblade, and gave him a good, hard kick to his spine.

Then...

Then?

He didn't know.

He had no idea how much time had passed, or what he had done in that time. A scream reached his ears.

"Ranboo!"

The terrified cry of his name made him freeze to the spot. His senses came back to him, and the blindness that had taken over faded away as suddenly as it had come. He looked down at the body by his feet.

Technoblade was in a state he had never seen him in before. His mouth was gaping, speechless. He was panting heavily. His large hands were shaking, and held the blade of the hybrid's sword away from him. The edge dug into his palms, drawing blood. It was merely a few inches away from slicing his head in two, and the look in his eyes was that of pure shock. Wet snow dripped from his snout and tusks, and his battle-axe lay a few feet away, sunken into the snow.

Ranboo dropped his sword. He stepped away, trembling. His hands clasped to his chest. "I—"

"Ranboo...?"

Technoblade sat up, with some difficulty. His voice softened considerably, worry taking over the gruff demeanour he had kept up until then.

Ranboo's hands fumbling into the folds of his cloak. He searched frantically for his memory book.

"I..."

"How did...?" The piglin stumbled to his feet, and picked up the discarded sword. He looked down at it, then back up at Ranboo. "Where did...?" He couldn't even manage to finish his own sentences.

"I'm sorry," the hybrid rushed to apologize. "I didn't mean to do any of that!"

He didn't know what exactly, but if the purple particles still floating around and slowly fading out of sight told him anything, it's that it was something he didn't quite know how to control yet.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Ranboo finally closed his hand around his memory book. He tore it open. His eyes scanned the cream coloured pages, searching for the answer. Only one single thought was running through his mind.

I knocked Technoblade down. I almost killed him!

"I don't know," he gulped.

The piglin's ear twitched. "Are you sure?"

"If I did, I would have remembered—" he began, then stopped. "Or I would have written it down... Or maybe I tried to copy you, or... I don't know..."

He was a moment away from a panic attack. The questions were becoming too much to bear. Images started flashing across his mind, colours and symbols he knew and could distinguish well but couldn't make any sense of.

"Are you sure?" Techno probed again. "Absolutely certain you don't remember?"

"I am!" Ranboo yelled, covering his ears. "Why do you keep asking me about things I don't know?"

The leather-bound book fell to the floor, landing in the snow with a soft thump. The wind flipped it open, turning the written pages with its gentle breeze. Scrawled on each page was an array of musings, from confessions to late night thoughts, the day's events to an inventory of farming equipment. Most could be considered treasonous if they fell into the wrong hands, and others could strike genuine concern for Ranboo's mental state.

"What happened?"

Muffled footsteps ran towards the two of them. Phil had joined them. He looked at each of them in turn. Shadows of black birds circled the air above him.

"I heard a yell." He reached out to Technoblade's bleeding palms, still dripping crimson blood onto the snow at his feet. "Are you alright?"

"Of course," the piglin grunted, shrugging off the hand Phil had placed on his shoulder.

"You did scream pretty loud, mate," Phil chuckled nervously. He gestured briefly to the range of snow capped mountains stretching up behind their home. "I'd be damned if you didn't accidentally cause an avalanche."

Techno crossed the avian's gaze with a cold glare. "I'll talk to you about that later," he hissed, unblinking. "In private."

Ranboo didn't like the implication but he held his tongue.

I'll speak to you about that later, without the kid eavesdropping.

"Alright," the avian agreed. He smiled at the hybrid. "What about you? Are you okay?"

Ranboo forced out a grin. "As always," he replied—which in reality meant he was terrified of himself and his mind, and that his anxiety was starting to peak again.

"Well, as long as you're both unharmed... I've baked some gratin. It'll be cooled down in a bit. Maybe you should lay off the training today."

Techno coughed, trying to regain his composure. "That sounds delicious. I'm right behind you," he said in a desperate attempt to change the subject. He retrieved his axe, and started to head towards his spruce and stone cabin.

Ranboo blocked his way.

"What is it, Techno?" he probed, returning to the issue at hand. His gaze was hard and cold, demanding answers even if that meant staring straight into the piglin's soul and coaxing them out that way if they weren't going to come from his snout. "You're never scared of anything."

"Oh, I am, Ranboo. I am."

"Are you scared of *me*?"

"I—"

"What is it, then?" He was about to start begging on his knees. "Tell me."

Silence fell, and Techno looked like he was about to ignore the question again. Ranboo was certain he would have, but Techno shook his head. He made no eye contact. He marched past the hybrid, thrusting his sword back to him.

The answer he eventually gave froze the very blood in Ranboo's veins.

"You fought exactly like Dream."

Chapter Seven: There Was A Man, Back In The Day...

"I'm telling you, that's what he did! I'm not crazy!"

Technoblade had seen many wonders throughout his lives. He had also seen just many horrors, but none that chilled him as much as the one that had taken place a few hours ago. The tundra wind had covered the sparring tracks, the weapons were put away, and the soaked clothes were wrung out and dried by the fireplace. The memory, however, was still very much fresh and vivid, an icicle that jabbed at him again and again.

It was like an open wound; fresh, unforgettable and a little painful, so much so that he absolutely had to spill the beans to Philza. They had been best friends for countless years now, and he was the only one Technoblade trusted completely, without a second thought.

The lodge was warm, and still smelt of their dinner; buttered potatoes, generous and thick fondue and freshly baked bread. A healthy fire crackled in the chimney, spitting embers at irregular intervals. They cast fiery orange shadows over the pictures that lined the walls—mostly wanted posters for a menacing, piglin warrior. His heavy, warm cape was drying on a chair beside the fireplace, soaked by the snow from earlier, and his boots were left by the door. His weapons were laid carefully on top of one of his chests and up against a corner. He wore nothing but his white, linen shirt, his dark brown bottoms, and a red sash looped around his waist.

He would have been relaxed, if his mind had been completely clear of the day's happenings.

Philza crouched down beside the hearth, heaving a couple more logs onto the roaring fire. "I'm not calling you a liar, Techno," he hummed.

The piglin grunted, rolling his eyes. He brought his foot up onto the wall behind him, glaring at his feathered back. "Really? Because it seems to me that you are."

"I'm not." Phil stood up, stretching his back. His feathers rustled against his robes. "I'm just—"

"You're just what?"

"Doubtful. I mean, this is Ranboo we're talking about. That doesn't seem like something he would do."

Techno shrugged and glanced out the window. The sun had begun to set long ago. The sky was darkening, now a shade of dark blue. A couple of early stars were speckled across it like silver beauty spots. The blankets of white snow that layered the ground shone like bright silk in the evening light, masses of snowflakes glimmering like precious jewels. Nocturnal shadows had started to take over the landscape, casting long pools of obscurity over the pristine arctic world.

He watched in silence as a tall, lanky figure trudged away from the cabin. His feet left deep, thin footprints behind him in the freshly fallen snow. He was heading towards a shaky shack leaning against the foot of one of the mountains, tucked away in a windproof crevice. It was invisible if one didn't know where to look. The only indication of anything being there at all was a dim lantern hanging over the doorway.

Ranboo stopped. He turned around. His green and red eyes blinked out of sync like a reptile's, and shone like two gems from afar. The pale side of his face blended in semi-perfectly with the snow around him, and the inky black camouflaged quite easily with the shadows. He was watching Techno at the window. Ranboo nervously bowed his head in a final show of farewell, and continued on his way home. Soon, his silhouette was swallowed completely, only to be revealed again as a dark silhouette through the glass-less windows of the shack. Ranboo reached out and shut his rickety shutters, bolting them securely from the inside.

"You weren't there, Phil," Techno continued once Ranboo had disappeared completely. "I was. I saw his eyes, and they were far from normal. They looked alive. Too alive to be sane. You could have sworn that he tasted blood and wanted more of it."

He knew what he was talking about. He knew the feeling all too well.

The piglin's expression darkened, the memory of the fight still fresh in his mind. His broad shoulders hunched as he closed in on himself, haunted.

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Philza cracked a smile. "That sounds like someone else I know," he smirked.

He crossed Phil's gaze. "You got me there," he admitted, slightly amused. "But that's the thing, I can control my urges. Those eyes that Ranboo had... you could tell that he could not."

Phil said nothing, thoughtful. Too much thinking, not enough action.

"He almost killed me, Phil!"

"We both know that's not true. "Technoblade never dies", after all."

"Only because I managed to snap him out of it before he could. Something's wrong with that kid."

"Techno!"

"I don't mean it like that," he was quick to correct.

"Then what *do* you mean?"

"I mean something's *wrong* with him, and it's much more than his memory problems. I can feel it."

"He's been training with you for a long time now. He would have obviously picked a few things up, defective memory or not."

The piglin shook his head. "That fighting style was not mine."

He pushed himself away from the wall, and began pacing the room. His bare trotters clicked gently against the wooden, planked floor as he walked back and forth.

"He could have come up with it on his own," Phil suggested.

"With techniques like that? He knew exactly where to hit me to get me down."

He stopped. A flash of realization.

"Only one person knows that."

"Who?"

"Dream."

Philza's bright features fell. "Dream? That's impossible."

Techno started to recount. "Years ago, we dueled in the same arena. That was the first time we met. It happened in a nation much further south than the Greater SMP, before it was even created, in fact. I was passing through on my travels, and the ruler of the land had organized a massive tournament, inviting warriors from all across the known lands to participate."

"Wait, but weren't you considered an—"

"Outlaw? Of course I was, in a kingdom or two. These people had no idea who I was, so getting into the tournament was no problem. I came out on top, and so did Dream. I remember our first meeting well, staring at each other on the opposite sides of the arena. There was still a bit of blood from the injured competitors in the sand beneath my feet. Someone had lost a helmet, and another a good luck charm. The crowd was cheering above us, wanting to see a show worthy of that name. We obliged, of course. The grand prize was a hundred thousand gold, and we were both desperate to get our hands on it. Dream was a thin, agile warrior. Lightening fast, and a quick thinker. Younger than me, but skilled. We were so similar in our youth. I thought I could crush him like a fly. An easy win. I was wrong. It wasn't a fair fight. One of us had clearly managed to snag a couple of favours."

He sniffed in disdain. His vision was bordered by a misty haze, mind drawn back into the memory of so long ago. He was barely even aware of Philza's presence.

"Dream had a shining set of beautifully crafted diamond armour," the piglin continued, the glare of it's sickening beauty still vividly etched within him, "and the sharpest blade anyone had ever seen. I had nothing but a suit of mail I salvaged off the black market and a blunt axe loaned to me by a local lumberjack."

"Dream had a sponsor, then?"

"Not just any sponsor," Techno detailed. "The richest one there was: the ruler of the land himself. The Beast, he was known as. He was a monarch who prided himself in his fortunes and favours. His kingdom prospered under his reign, and he was ready to aid anyone who needed anything, from a ragged beggar hobbling along the streets to the most powerful warrior or leader. Dream had obviously managed to seek his help."

"And you didn't," Phil guessed. They both already knew the answer.

"I didn't even think about it," Technoblade agreed, puffing out his chest. His tone, he was well aware, was bordering on prideful. The piglin walked over to a window, and stared across the barren, snowy landscape again. A snow storm had picked up, hurling hoards of snowflakes through the air and down to the ground. "I was there to prove myself, not to stand out in the flashiest armour possible."

"But you won, didn't you?" Phil interjected.

"I won. Six rounds to four. The Beast was delighted. The battles between me and Dream were wild and exciting, and it was exactly what he wanted to see. He gave me the money, but I decided to split it with my opponent. It was a farewell gift of sorts, and a bid of good luck on wherever his ventures would take him. I never thought I would see him again, until Wilbur called me to aid Pogtopia in their revolution."

At the mention of Wilbur, they both fell quiet. Techno had lived with Phil long enough to know what the air felt like when he'd tense up. The whole room shifted, and the piglin began to regret saying anything.

He watched the avian closely for a while. He looked down, up, away, and then cleared his throat. In a second or two, he was back.

"I feel like you've told me this story before," Phil remarked. "What does this have to do with Ranboo?"

Techno continued, desperate to change the subject. "Fighting against and alongside Dream taught us both a few things. I learned how to avoid falling for any traps or tricks he might have up his sleeve, and he in turn learned how to take me down. I remember when he first did, during the tournament. He used an enderpearl, and before I knew it, he pushed me down from behind. I was shocked. I don't know how he knew where exactly to hit me. I don't know how long or what he observed to find that out, but he did. He still knows. No one else does, except apparently Ranboo."

"That could just be a coincidence," Phil pointed out.

"The teleporting and the exact spot?" The piglin was still incredibly skeptical. "I disagree."

It was now Philza's turn to pace the room. "Ranboo's half enderman, is he not?" he said, turning to the piglin. "He hasn't fully mastered those abilities yet."

"That's true."

Techno thought of the number of times Ranboo had randomly appeared beside him, accompanied by a cloud of floating purple particles, and the way he would sometimes come home with certain things in his possession, raw materials that couldn't be harvested as they were normally with one's own two hands—unless one had the silk touch of an ender-folk's fingers.

"And he's tried to overpower you so many times with no results," Phil continued. "It was only a matter of time before he tried to take you down from behind. He's a smart kid, Techno."

Techno couldn't disagree. Philza's arguments made sense.

But those eyes—

"Anyways," Phil quickly added, as if to reassure him. "Where, when and why would he train with Dream? He's locked up in the Vault."

An uncomfortable feeling still nagged him at the back of Techno's mind. The mind that usually screamed for blood and violence was now concerned for a young boy's safety.

Again.

Those impulses never did anyone any favours.

"I don't know," he said, "but Dream is good at talking people into things for his own gains. Maybe Ranboo didn't even realize what was happening. There has to be something. His eyes, they weren't *right*. They weren't *normal*. He wasn't his normal self."

"To be fair, do we really know the what the "normal" Ranboo is?"

The young hybrid had been living near and with them for a good while now, yet there was still a large amount of secrecy shrouding him. He seemed to have no past before arriving in the realms, no hopes for the future, and no reliable memory to count on for either. After about a day or two of scrutinizing and asking invasive questions, both Philza and Technoblade had stopped trying to decipher him and his odd whims.

Maybe they should have pried a little more, in hindsight.

The piglin sighed. "No, we don't. But even a blind man could tell you that those eyes weren't normal for someone like Ranboo." A shiver crawled up his spine, still slightly sore from the harsh impact of the hybrid's kick. "They were full of anger, swallowed up by something..."

"Grief, perhaps?"

Technoblade frowned, furrowing his brow. "Grief?"

"Over Tommy."

"Oh, right."

His acknowledgement was cold and short, and he fell silent. He didn't know why. Tommy's death had nothing to do with him. If Phil was expecting him to say more, he'd be sorely mistaken.

"The funeral was a couple of days ago," the avian said.

"Did you go?"

Techno was curious.

They were the dearest of friends, and yet Technoblade still couldn't understand him sometimes. Philza often chuckled that he couldn't comprehend Techno all the time either.

It didn't make their bond any weaker, but did make it harder to help one another with their problems. The two of them were independent, sometimes too much so.

He searched Philza eyes. He found nothing but indifference.

"Only to bring Ranboo back. The poor mate was out of his mind."

"He's a pretty sensitive one, isn't he?" Techno grunted with a shrug.

"Perhaps," Phil agreed, "but then again I don't think he ever had to honour a permanent death before. He's still young, no matter how tall he is compared to us."

"So was Tommy," the piglin grunted. "He was just a kid. I mean, he asked for it, if you want my opinion. But he was still young, and Ranboo was on surprisingly good terms with him."

"He was." The air around them changed. The avian's gaze was drawn out of the window. "It's getting late."

Techno glanced out of the window as well. He opened it, and when faced with the violent lashes of the northern wind whipping at his hands and floppy ears, he quickly pulled his shutters closed. "I think another blizzard is upon us," he tutted. "We might be snowed in overnight."

"In that case, I'd better get going." Phil reached for his cloak and swung it over his back.

Techno glanced at their half-empty mugs of hot chocolate. "Are you sure you don't want to stay a bit longer?"

"The crows will have my head if I don't feed them," Philza chuckled.

Philza's cabin had been built not even ten paces away from Techno's, the two front doors connected by a spruce deck. It was a spitting image of it, although the inside noticeably had a lot more bird droppings than Technoblade's.

"I think the best thing we can do when it comes to Ranboo is to forget what happened today," Philza said. "Let him heal and mourn Tommy for as long as he needs. He'll regain his normality—whatever it may be—in his own way and in his own time. Grief can make people do strange things."

Technoblade could see his reflection in the glass panes as he pulled in the shutters and closed the windows. Philza grabbed his wide-brimmed hat. He made a move to leave.

"Do you mean like it did to you?"

Philza's hand froze on the doorknob. Techno knew he should have stopped there. He was treading into sensitive territory, but he couldn't help himself.

"Wilbur."

The avian turned back to Techno, who certainly regretted bringing up the touchy subject.

Still, he continued. "Is that why you joined the Commune?"

Philza smiled at him. A smile to be sure, but a pained one at that.

"No, I joined the Commune because you're my best friend, and we promised each other the world."

The truth had been halved, and they both knew it. They both didn't go searching for the forgotten scrap. It had been ignored for a reason.

"Goodnight, Techno," Philza whispered simply. A finality.

Techno sighed. "Goodnight, Phil. Sleep well."

Neither of them would.

Philza left, soon enveloped by the blazing snow storm and the swirling snowflakes as he trudged back to his own home. His tattered wings braces against the cold, rising above his head and flapping against the blizzard.

Technoblade's heart jumped for a second, hopeful.

Philza didn't fly. He couldn't anymore, no matter how much Techno would pray that he would again.

Instead, he was a tattered, grounded ghost, haunting the tundra, slipping in and out of the piglin's home whenever he pleased, cold eyes veiling any and all emotion whenever any mentions of his sons arose.

But above all, he was Technoblade's whole world. He would give him everything and more.

Some things, sadly, were still out of his reach.

Chapter Eight: Frightened Minds

Dawn had broken not too long ago, bringing in the morning light of what promised to be a bright and clear day. The sun rose slowly in the east, painting the sky with bold strokes of pastel tones. The violet shadows on the snowy ground faded slowly, giving up their place to the bright rays that made the white world glitter. The wind gently tossed around small clouds of stray, silver snowflakes that spiraled up and over the mountain peaks.

Ranboo stood at the window of his cabin, staring blankly out into the sunrise. He didn't have the energy to marvel at any of it.

His head was too fuzzy. His eyes were heavy, and he had a hard time keeping them open. His pointed ears lay flat against his head. He routinely let out strings of big yawns, opening his mouth wide and exposing his sharp teeth. His clothes were heavily creased, still stinking of the sweat from yesterday's exertions. He hadn't bothered to change.

Ranboo hadn't slept all night. Too many thoughts kept him awake, buzzing ceaselessly in his brain like a cloud of bees. First light was hardly a blessing for his aching bones and exhausted mind. He only wanted to drift off into a heavy slumber and sleep until the unforgiving tundra landscape finally thawed—in short, he never wanted to wake up again.

In the distance, the doors to Philza's cabin opened, pushing against the piles of snow that had blocked the threshold overnight. The avian stepped out, his tattered wings stretching out to their full wingspan behind him. A flock of crows assembled, diving down onto him as a twirling cyclone of black feathers and shrill cries. Some emerged from the roof rafters, some flew down from the mountains, and other early birds had chosen to wait for their feathered friends on fence posts. They landed wherever they could, including on Phil himself. He offered them something in the palm of his hand and they dug in greedily. He threw the rest onto the deck, then headed back inside to grab a spade, and began shoveling away the mounds of snow left by the passing blizzard.

Ranboo's eyes were then drawn to Technoblade's silhouette, who left his house with a handful of carrots and hurried around to the small stable adjacent to his home. A loud and delighted whinny shook the snowdrifts. Carl was happily receiving his breakfast.

Everything was so peaceful. It only made the lack of sleep harder to stomach. Ranboo's tail dragged lazily behind him as he stepped away from the window, running a cramping hand through his matted, messy hair.

His shack was far from being a luxury abode. It was made for simple needs, not for comfort. The walls were made of crudely cut wooden planks, hammered together as best as the amateur builder could. The window panes were dirty and cracked in some places. A small bed was tucked in one of the corners along with a chest for necessities, and a rickety stool used as a night stand. A trapdoor near the back wall concealed a ladder leading down to a small, shallow basement. The ceiling was low, so low that Ranboo had to bend his head whenever he stood up. Sometimes—oftentimes—he forgot, and he had the bruises to prove it.

Many of the utilities in his shack were like that; big enough to serve their purpose, but all too small to be properly comfortable. Ranboo only had his own hands to blame, but he didn't complain about his self-sabotage. He just lived with it.

Techno and Phil had both kept trying to persuade Ranboo to move in with them, or at least let them build him a winter-proof, cosy and comfortable cabin like theirs. Ranboo kept refusing. They were too kind to him already. He didn't want to give them more grief than he had to. The ill-fitting walls of his wooden shack had survived against the elements up til then. It was good enough.

He yawned once more, unhinging his aching jaw, his eyes drifting to the spruce writing desk hidden in the corner.

It was minuscule, and a space more suited for a three-year old child rather than a seven-foot-tall enderman hybrid. He was forced to fold his legs underneath when he sat down and to hunch over when writing. It wasn't the most comfortable nor the most healthy of situations, to be sure, but it did the job. He had sat there all night long.

Bleakly watching the morning light had been the first time he had allowed his back to stretch in hours. If he wasn't careful, he could be locked in a slouching position for the rest of his lives. He knew that, but he hadn't made any move to fix his posture. That was the least of his worries.

Soon enough and against his better judgment he was back in that position, sitting back down at the child-sized desk, on the even smaller stool at his disposal. He may as well have been crouching. He stared at his memory book.

The journal was open at blank double page, stained only by a small ink blot from the nib of his leaking quill. The small glass inkwell sitting at the top of the desk was lying on its side, and a small stream of black ink poured out and onto the floor. The white feathered quill lay to the side, moving gently with the breeze drifting through the cracks in the windows.

Ranboo turned the pages of his book until he reached the passages he had written the night before.

He couldn't remember what they were about. He had been caught up in a sort of manic trance, quill scratching the parchment and cramming the cream-coloured pages with lines upon lines of a different, cryptic script. It was one the hybrid had used once or twice before, but unconsciously. He would be writing normally, then doze off, then find when he came to that half of his ramblings were written in an odd, coded alphabet. It was made up of symbols that looked like they were meant to make sense, and yet still looked off in one way or another.

He didn't know how he knew how to use it, or where it had come from. All he knew is he was apparently fluent in it, and could easily read what he had written in the light of day. His head still hurt, thumping and complaining, yet he still forced himself to start reading.

Self-sabotage.

His body froze as he did, and his green and red eyes widened.

I knocked down the Blade. We were training together, and I knocked him down. Finally, after so long... I did it. I managed to shove his mashed-up face and that boastful snout into the ground, and stand high over him, higher than anyone before. Not many people have had such an honour, but I am now one of them.

I almost killed him too. Quite easily. He's defenseless once he's thrown down. Seeing the Blade so scared fuels me. For the first time, he knew who the true victor of this battle was. He never could fathom it before. His ego wouldn't let him. The promise of blood and violence overcame him so often, he forgot what failure and terror were.

His eyes were wide with horror. He didn't speak at first. The winner becoming the loser is such a satisfying thing to witness. I should have been quicker. I should have brought the sword down on his neck, and watched as the snow turned red with his precious blood. I should have been quicker.

I haven't seen Him for a while now. I know He is locked up, but I need to tell Him I have done well. He will be proud. He has taught me well.

:)

Ranboo snapped the book shut, and held his head in his hands. His long, bony fingers dragged through his salt and pepper hair again, trembling like leaves. The worst part about it was that those weren't *all* the ramblings he had scrawled, far from it. He had barely scratched—or read—the surface. It terrified him: the bloodlust and grotesque sense of accomplishment, of pride, in those couple of paragraphs were enough to deter him from doing so.

Ranboo stood up violently, knocking the small writing desk. It shook on its spindly legs. He locked eyes with himself in the cracked mirror hanging on one of the walls.

He didn't *look* like a monster. If anything, he remembered a few acquaintances calling him a gentle, anxious giant on their first meeting, and very few had ever referred to him as a creature, at least not to his face.

As Ranboo looked at himself, he could see what they meant. He may have been different to other ender-folk, he may have a strange, spindly physique, and he may have some strange abilities he did not know how to master, but he shared many more similarities with the forest fawns and the baby foals prancing around during the springtime. He was a nervous creature, all limbs, with wide, shining eyes and brisk, swift movements.

The hybrid's mind, however, was another story. His mind was terrifying. One moment, he'd be whistling a cheery tune and giving a happy, helping hand to whoever needed it. The next, he was being outed as a supposed traitor in front of an entire nation. With his atrocious memory, many thoughts and recollections were lost over time—some big, some small, some important, some not—and he usually had no way to confirm or deny what he was being accused of.

He tried to fight it. He tried to explain, to defend his supposed actions. Now, he would just hang his head and accept any and all accusations thrown his way. Flaming confidence dwindled to a smouldering ember, ready to go out with a puff of air.

The memory book he held onto was meant to help him, and for a while, it did. Now, it was less about important events and details, and more nonsensical ramblings about everything and anything.

He may not *look* like a monster, but he knew his mind was *infested* by one.

Ranboo let out a small exhale, and whispered, "I'm sorry."

He didn't know who he was apologizing to. Perhaps it was to himself.

Three simultaneous knocks hammered against his front door. Ranboo snapped to attention. He rushed to clear away his small desk and pocketed his journal before hurrying over to the front door of his shack. He quickly adjusted his clothes and cleared his throat, before opening the door. He expected it to be Technoblade coming to drag him off to breakfast.

It wasn't the piglin, but someone oh so similar.

A fuzzy ball of energy rammed into Ranboo, pushing him down to the floor and knocking the air out of him.

"Ranboo!" the little blur squealed, ending his exclamation with a high-pitched grunt.

The hybrid stared down his nose at the weight on his chest. Michael grunted, his wide blue eye bright and curious, his snout curving up into a smile.

"Michael," a disapproving voice echoed after him. "Did you really have to attack him like that?"

"I didn't *attack* him!" the little piglin grunted in protest, craning his neck to look around. "I gave him a *surprise*!"

"I'm sure it was, because I don't think Ranboo expected to break his spine today."

Ranboo shook his head to clear his thoughts. He shuffled to his feet, picking up Michael in the process.

Many often looked down upon adopted children in the SMP. It wasn't put forward by any conservative values or personal prejudice, rather by a sense of pity and melancholy.

Why anyone would willingly bring another child into the heart of the SMP's wars was beyond the comprehension of many. Those same defensive people advocated for the preservation of the young, and yet still saw no moral disagreements with using them in their armies when they wanted to.

Well, what else was Ranboo supposed to do when he found a heavily injured baby piglin in the Nether, skin peeling off his bones and two steps away from falling into a lava lake?

Leave him to die?

Michael was as bright as a button and an upbeat little fellow who with a lot of patience and determination had learned to communicate in words other than pained grunting and squealing. Now, he was as excitable and mischievous as any other young child his age.

He was Ranboo's son, his pride and joy.

As the enderman hybrid held the little piglin in his arms, he smiled, and felt his heart swell to twice its size. The previous feelings of exhaustion were almost completely

washed away by devoted affection, one that had never waned since the rescue mission that had brought Michael into his life.

"My tusks are starting to grow," Michael told his father, ecstatic and eager to show him. Indeed, small curved points of a blinding white had begun to sprout, and the young piglin prodded them with his finger and pointed to the doorway. "Tubbo said I'll look like Uncle Techno in no time!"

The second visitor entered his line of vision.

Ranboo smiled warmly. "Hi, Tubbo."

He greeted him happily, even as the ram's empty spot at Tommy's funeral still insisted on haunting him.

Something the boy hadn't really thought of before was this: what had happened to him?

He didn't remember anything before he woke up in the inky abyss, as if he had just been born there and then with no memories or true thoughts of his own. The black room, its mysterious inhabitant and the wall of lava were all he had ever known. He would have been content with believing that was where he first entered the world, but something nagged at him.

Something was missing.

Oh, he knew words and their meaning, but had no images to go with them. Things like flowers, trees, stars and houses. Just jumbles of letters, just sounds he couldn't speak from his own throat. Lots of pictures were simply blurs. It couldn't be all he was, all he could remember. There had to be more to it, or at least to the place he found himself stuck in. His mind was whirring, processing the meagre contents of a practically empty head.

For a long time—an exact length of time, he could not give, it felt like years,—the hard black walls had been all he could see, all he had wandered. Ages and ages, with nothing to show for it than a battered morale and a deep hatred of the colour black. It was endless. The structure he was locked in was a labyrinth, only there were no wax or feathers to use to make wings and fly away and no Minotaur in the center to slay in bloodied glory.

His eyes snapped open.

A bright orange glare hit his senses. Warm blankets of lava fell from above, layering over him and wrapping his curled up form in a cosy cocoon, the closest thing he ever had to comfort. He closed his eyes again. His taut muscles relaxed immediately, and he was close to drifting off into another slumber.

Wax and feathers...

Minotaur...

The voice speaking of them in his head was not his own. It was deep and rough, hardened by horrors he couldn't fathom.

What was it even talking about? How could wax and feathers make usable wings? It was ridiculous! What even was a Minotaur?

He shuffled into a more comfortable position, stretching out spread-eagled on his back, limbs reaching out to their fullest.

"Or maybe I am going crazy in here..."

The stranger's voice came back to him, along with the dull glint in his eyes. He seemed to know a lot more than the boy did, in any case, about the black halls and rooms that drove them both to insanity.

Whoever had created this place was driven by evil desires, that the boy told himself regularly. Every time he couldn't adjust to the warmth and the cold, every time one darkened hallway gave away to another, even more shadowy one, every time the exit was never found. That was one of the reasons why he kept to the pockets and walls of lava when he could. He spent countless amounts of time simply floating in the thick, warm substance, because what else could he do when hell was quite literally frozen all over? It was oddly therapeutic, and for a few moments he could forget about the cold void of a world he was trapped in.

He debated on what he could do. Either, he could bask in the lava forever, his glowing cocoon drifting him off and on for as long as he wanted. Or, he could wander the halls again and hopefully find something new. He knew exactly which one he was going to go with.

The bubbling lulled him back into a light sleep, and he let out a small and silent yawn. His throat burned him. Any sound he made racked his body with agony. The lava tried to dull the pain, its heavy blankets wrapping around his neck like a warm, caring hand.

Almost like an angel.

Something chimed.

The boy sat up. His ears rang, echoing an odd sound inside of his head. It was a gentle one, but hurt him nevertheless. The red spots returned, dancing again in cryptic circles around his vision. He clapped his hands over his ears. Jangling, like strips of metal hitting and rubbing against each other.

Keys.

He didn't know how he knew that. The boy removed his hands.

Keys. That was what keys sounded like, right? He didn't remember. He just knew.

He turned his head to one side of the wall of lava. The noises were getting closer and closer. Heavy steps joined the advancing orchestra.

Footsteps and keys.

The boy never made any noise at all, and the stranger never left his spot against the wall.

That could only mean...

Someone was here.

Someone *else* was here.

The boy wasted no time in scrambling out of the lava, and he soon emerged back into the world of shadows and ice.

A figure walked straight past him.

He pressed his back to the obsidian wall, his heart pounding in his chest. He didn't know why. He had been searching for help for such a long time, and now it was here, he was cowering like a frightened baby deer.

He followed the newcomer with his gaze as they continued down the hallway, squinting to get a better look. They were tall and from the back the boy could see a dark cloak billow out behind them. The only other thing that he could glimpse was a long, sharp tool with three prongs that the stranger carried along. It was blue and silver and was the brightest thing he had ever laid eyes on in the absolute obscurity. The boy had never seen so much colour. The jangling continued, coming from a ring of silvery black keys hanging from the stranger's hand.

The boy followed them. He made sure to stay a good few paces behind, jumping back in fear each time the figure stopped. They'd do so often, perhaps every couple of minutes. The boy watched them carefully.

The stranger's shoulders would hunch forwards ever so slightly, and their gloved hand would grip the keys a little tighter. Their breathing hitched as well, echoing creepily in the hall. Once or twice, he even thought he heard the stranger whisper a few words of gentle reassurance to themselves in a low voice. He never managed to catch any of them.

The boy kept following silently. Eventually, he got a little braver, picking up his pace just a little every so often until soon enough he was silently treading merely a couple of feet behind the stranger.

He looked up at the back of their head, and realized they weren't as big as he first thought, perhaps only a head or so higher than himself. From the brief and few glimpses of light shining from a couple of lava spots, the boy could make out their hair colour. Varying shades of green, with a couple of strands of golden brown here and there.

Colours. He knew what colours was. That was a start.

Everything about the newcomer burned his eyes, the shine unnatural to him. He took a step further, until he was walking directly beside the other. Again, he looked up at them—him, he soon realized. The shadows still obscured a good part of his view, but he could just make out the outline of the man's profile, as well as the glowing ringed lime irises and white pupils in his blackened eyes, staring only forwards. What the boy had also not noticed was the suit of armour he wore. It was made of bright, shiny gold and scratched from either age or battle, or even both.

The boy drew his arms around himself as the previously warm corridor gave away to a freezing cold one. The stranger barely flinched at the change. In fact, the stranger had barely reacted to anything other than his own stops, including to the boy walking quietly alongside him.

It was bizarre.

Perhaps the figure was simply too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice him. The boy opened his mouth to say something. Immediately, the white hot pain in his throat returned like a knife, a threat, beating him to any words he wanted to say. He closed it again.

He looked around him, and was somewhat pleased to recognize an area he knew. He may have wandered the world for such a long time, alone, without an ending or an exit in sight, but small and particular paths and chambers now started to seem familiar. Perhaps it was by chance, perhaps he was genuinely remembering the floor plan of the structure he found himself trapped in. The cold from before began to fade, only to be replaced by a cosy warmth as a wall of lava rose in front of them both.

The boy stopped in his tracks, wondering what the figure was going to do. He watched as the stranger walked over to one side of the room. He laid his trident against the wall and fiddled with his keys, inserting one into a small, discreet lock in the obsidian wall that even the boy hadn't noticed. He turned the key with a sharp click. Something behind the walls groaned and creaked. The boy glanced up in fright as the noises continued in quick succession up to the ceiling.

The stranger himself brushed them off, and walked over to the lava wall. He wrapped his hand around the handle of the lever there, and paused. His fingers tightened, trembling, and his breathing changed again. He muttered something to himself in a shaky, quiet tone, something barely audible, but that the boy managed to catch.

"I can't do this."

His first proper words, and how dark too. They somehow felt like his last too.

Can't do what?

The boy didn't linger on his question for too long, and took the stranger's hesitation as an opportunity to finally, somehow, make his presence known. He couldn't speak, but that didn't mean he couldn't try something else. Swiftly, he reached out and gently touched the stranger's arm.

A sudden wave washed over. He gripped the man's arm tighter. His mouth fell open with a silent cry for help as agony washed over him, agony and a melancholy deeper and more powerful than anything he had ever felt before, or thought he'd ever felt before.

He didn't let go.

He didn't want to let go.

He had a feeling he couldn't let go.

The movements he witnessed next scared him right down to his core. The armoured figure immediately grabbed hold of his weapon, and spun around. The sudden, abrupt change of demeanour destabilised the boy, and he tripped. He fell back first onto the obsidian floor, panting hard, and eyes opened wide with terror as he watched the figure.

The stranger was breathing heavily too, darting furtive glances left and right as he tried to locate whatever, or whoever, had touched him. "Who's there?" he growled menacingly. No reply.

The boy however could easily detect his fear. In the light of the lava, the figure's face was much more visible. A strange, beefy mask covered his jaw, but the boy could see the light skin under his eyes, speckled with green. A strange, battered round pendant hung from around his neck, bouncing gently against his armour.

The stranger looked around again, his trident ready to plunge itself into whatever was hiding there. The boy didn't dare move. He stayed on the floor and silently backed away, keeping a single hand over his mouth for fear that his breathing would give him away.

After a moment, the stranger relaxed his frantic attack stance, and calmed himself. His eyes still darted around nervously. He cautiously turned back to his job, and pulled the lever. The creaks returned from all around them, and the boy watched as the curtain of orange began to lower in stages, disappearing below his line of vision.

He sat up a little straighter and stared, mesmerized, as the true size of the room was revealed. Beyond the low doorway and the sinking lava, a large, dark chamber lay in waiting. The falling lava trickled into a pool below, lighting up the walls with frightening, moving shadows. In the middle, a noticeably smaller—yet still large—black box hung in awkward suspension over the lava lake, held up by sturdy, ridiculously large iron chains. The front of it was open, revealing what lay within.

The boy's eyes widened even more for inside the black box sat a silhouette, a silhouette he thought he recognized. It was the first man he had seen, and the one who first said to sense him. The one who didn't smile, whose eyes glinted with an intimidating glare, and whose voice cracked like thin ice.

The Man in the Box.

At least, the boy thought it was. The figure he glimpsed on the other side of the room was very different, behaviour-wise, as if he had been switched out at the last second. As if the boy was being purposely toyed with.

The man cracked a wide smile, held up his hand in a greeting, and waved. "Hello, Sam!" he chirped happily and loudly over the bubbling pit below, his eyes sparkling.

The boy tilted his head, confused. He looked up at the stranger he had trailed.

The figure didn't answer. He didn't return the greeting. His eyes burned with seething anger.

The boy shuffled further away, and looked down at himself. He forgot how clear he was, and it shocked him. The outlines of his arms and legs were certainly there, but still vague and faded. He could easily make out the black floor through his own skin. But he could still see himself.

The boy glanced up at the Golden Guard—who could have been nothing else, as judged by the pieced together elements of the armour, the keys and the weapon, and whose name was apparently Sam, unless that was the boy's own name—confused.

Why can't you see me?

Chapter Nine: Two Masks

Masks are odd things.

They shapeshift, they lie and they carry unspeakable truths. They can depict another character, like a fox or a witch on carnival or Halloween masks. They can be beautifully intricate and artistic, like ones many would have worn back in the day to respectable, high society masquerades and balls. They can be worn to save lives from toxic smells, or protect lungs from dusty deserts. They can put forth a person's personality as much as they can conceal it.

A mask can also be figurative. It can hide so many things, from intentions to true feelings. It can twist a perception, enhance it, or corrupt it entirely.

Dream had one of each kind.

The first, and most infamous, was literal. A round, white plate with a simple smile inked on its damaged surface. The edges were chipped, and hairline cracks darted over the white surface. It looked like an antique, ready to shatter at any moment.

No one knew what it was really made of. Some said metal, others said crafted porcelain.

Dream said nothing.

But if that single mask had survived for years across violent wars and bloodshed, it was definitely made of something strong.

The second mask was the figurative one. A calm, collected personality, with a simple smile inspiring trust and kindness drawn on its scarred and scratched surface. The edges were chipped, and cracks were few and far between but there all the while, letting a chaotic and ruthless tyrant peep out from underneath in short but devastating bursts.

No one knew what it was really made of. Some said traumatic events had forced him to build it, others said he simply had no heart for the weak and the suffering.

Dream said nothing.

But if *that* single mask had survived for years across violent wars and bloodshed, it was *definitely* made of something strong.

The first mask had been taken from Dream even before he stepped into the prison. It was now lying somewhere in the giant complex of halls, corridors, cells and secret rooms along with the other belongings on his person that had been confiscated during his arrest.

The second mask, however, was still there, plastered on his face at that very moment. At first, not many people had known about it, and were shocked to learn the truth. Others sat smugly, eyeing everyone else with a bragging air of "I told you so!". Some still refused to believe that it existed.

The Warden knew that mask was there. He knew, but he still struggled to distinguish what was real from what was an act.

"Sam," the prisoner cried happily once the warden had stepped off the moving bridge.
"Long time no see!"

His tone was unusually chirpy and upbeat. Sam found it sickening. He refused to reply, or even give the convict the satisfaction of reacting. He waited until the bridge was pulled back and got on with his tasks. He didn't like to admit it, but he had neglected his rounds recently, especially to the holding cell he now stood in. It had taken him a good, long wait with much thought and consideration thrown in to finally find enough courage to face the obsidian chamber again. His eyes quickly scanned the surroundings, a heavy lump forming in his throat.

No, he'd keep himself together. Emotions didn't belong in Pandora's Vault.

"Have you finally come to fix my clock?"

The warden walked to one of the walls, and squinted. The dark obsidian made it extremely difficult to pick out any abnormalities, if there were any at all. He dragged his gloved fingers across the rough, humid surface, trying to pick out any potential cracks or signs of erosion. The added dripping of the crying obsidian didn't help with the task. The purple goo covered his gloves, and he had to pause every few seconds to wipe it away on his chest plate.

"It's been broken for a while, y'know."

Sam continued examining the wall. It was only where he reached a recently wet spot that he faltered. The blood was still visible. It should have been cleaned up almost immediately, that he knew that. He should have done it, but now...

It still remained, and would for possibly forever, as long as the prison held up.

Sam crouched down, and removed his glove. He placed his bare hand on the wall, sighing deeply. He dragged it down ever so lightly, and tried as hard as he could not to recoil when he removed it.

The damp, humid walls hadn't allowed the blood to completely dry. They kept it just wet enough, a thin mask of watery substance that now partially stained the warden's fingers. Sam wanted to throw up.

"Sam?"

For the first time, he turned to the voice. "What?" he replied coldly.

The criminal gestured to one of the bare, black walls. A small, blunt hook was the only thing on it. "My clock?"

"What about it?"

"Are you going to fix it?"

"Why would I?"

"I'd like to see how long my injuries took to heal."

Dream lowered the collar of his tattered prison uniform, revealing the couple of round, festering wounds on his collarbone and shoulder. The healing layers were crusty, with obvious signs that he had tried picking at them. Unhealthy-looking pale red rings rimmed the scabs.

Sam glanced in disdain, and ignored them. He moved over to the other side of the cell, and started to inspect that too.

"I would *really* like to know, Sam."

"Tough."

"You did this to me. I think I'm *entitled* to know."

Sam lingered on part of the wall, his fingers stroking the prongs of his trident. "And I'll do it again if you don't stay quiet," he threatened.

"You won't." Dream was smirking when the Warden turned to him. His eyes sparkled, amused and laughing. "I know you won't."

Sam opened his mouth to lash back, to correct the prisoner's insolence, but he didn't say anything. He tried to brush away his feeble attempt at a reply, and he gritted his teeth. Despite the act his body desperately wanted to commit, he knew that the criminal was right.

He wouldn't do it. He couldn't do it.

A single crumb of belief had stopped him from ending Dream's life then and there, a small spark of hope in what was most likely a fairytale.

If Tommy was merely injured, oh, Sam wouldn't have hesitated. The next time he would have thrust the trident into the prisoner, it would have been for the last time. He would have aimed for his neck. He would have done it, if he was positive that killing Dream once and for all would solve anything. He hated to admit that it wouldn't. Dream's death

might bring some sort of justice, some sort of glory, if the outcome of Tommy's prison visit had been different.

Tommy had told him multiple times that he was setting foot into the prison for the last time.

"I don't know why I keep coming," the boy had confided to the Warden when he stored his belongings in the locker room. "I don't need to see Dream any more!"

Sam had been standing in the doorway, waiting for him. He would remember that interaction for as long as his three lives still beat. It had been the last time he saw the boy.

Tommy had sat down on the floor, and slipped off his netherite leg-guards, storing them in the locker as well. He brushed a hand over the compass hanging around his neck, and removed that too. He had made a move to take off the green bandana he wore, but Sam stopped him with a small gesture.

He had trusted Tommy enough to know that letting him bring the neck tie in was not a security threat.

Tommy patted his pockets, checking that nothing else was on him, and he shut the chest when he was done, a determined look plastered on his face.

"I'm going to get some closure today," he vowed.

The Warden had always kept up his serious, cold demeanour when guiding visitors through the prison halls, even with Tommy. He had still allowed himself to give the boy an approving nod that day, and a small, discreet smile under his gas-mask.

Closure was something so many people lacked, and something that so many desperately needed. Tommy was one of those people.

From a young age, he had been tossed into wars and skirmishes, learning to fight for his life and take others without hesitation. He had helped run a nation and lead two revolutions. He had been exiled twice and was frequently shunned by his peers. Any shred of childhood he had, or should have had, was null and void in the long run, replaced instead by a harsh upbringing only suited to a soldier of considerable experience. With everything that had happened, Tommy barely got to be a kid. That was the extent of what Sam had found out.

No one had tried to help the poor boy through it.

The four adults Tommy had looked up to ended up betraying, or scarring him forever.

Wilbur had slowly turned insane, and ended up betraying the Pogtopia revolution and Tommy by association, before losing his last life in a horrible tragedy. His remaining legacy had been one of fear and contempt within L'Manberg and beyond, one many warned others about. He was the textbook example of what not to choose to become. It still didn't stop some from admiring him, a few to stupidly strong fanaticism.

Technoblade had simply been true to the legends about him, always out for violence and war, and had reacted to one of the boy's whims by destroying his nation and spilling the blood of many innocent citizens. When their morals and methods didn't align, there was nothing to be done.

Philza had simply turned his back on the boy, and had retreated with Technoblade up in the northern lands after he too had played a part in the Doomsday destruction, and Wilbur's own death.

And Dream?

Dream had taken advantage of whatever he could to control Tommy, whether it was his discs, or the ties he had with so many people he held dear to him. He continued the sick manipulation up to the day he was put into the Vault.

Now, Sam was faced with the criminal, who was smiling wickedly at his inner dilemma and boiling rage.

Dream smirked again, trying to keep eye contact as the warden turned away. "You alright there, my friend?" he asked innocently, his voice feigning concern. "You're turning a little green."

Green.

Green freckles and hair.

Hilarious.

The comment would have normally drawn a chuckle out from the Warden, if it had come from someone else, anyone else, at any other time.

"My welfare is none of your concern," he growled, "just like your whining and wants are none of mine."

"A prison warden willingly leaving a prisoner to rot in inhumane conditions?" Dream clicked his tongue. "Now, that's something I wonder if many outsiders are aware of..."

"You think I'll be *nice* to you?" Sam scoffed, indignant. "After everything you've done?"

"I figured not, after the absence of a trial of any kind. The denial of any basic rights in this situation speaks louder than most words."

"I didn't have to come and see you," Sam lied. "You know that, right?"

"Should I feel honoured? Grovel at your feet and thank you profusely for taking time out of your day to keep me, the lowly prisoner, company? Come on, now."

"Why are you begging for a clock?"

"I already told you, and I'm not going to repeat myself."

"If you needed it so much, why did you throw the others away?"

"I had to amuse myself somehow," the criminal replied calmly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Amuse himself. That's all he ever seemed to do. With every past action, every retort, every life taken. Amusement.

"It gets boring in here, you know."

"I don't, actually."

Sam's dry reply cracked like lightning through the stuffy air.

Dream locked their gazes together. His emerald eyes sparked with a malicious glint, and Sam couldn't drag his own away. Something held him there, some obscure force he could not see, or seem to control. Those eyes held many secrets and stories, and dark thoughts that would chill even the most powerful warriors to the bone.

"Then perhaps you should spend some time here, alone," the prisoner said.

The Warden froze. The sentence was innocently said, but a creeping fear shot up his spine, and he faced the prisoner again. "What do you mean by that?"

Dream blinked back, passively watching his jailer's growing worry and shaking frame. He grinned.

"Don't worry about it," he reassured the Warden in a sickly sweet tone. "I'm only kidding. You're just as trapped as me, anyhow."

Sam was about to use his "persuasive" ways to get him to elaborate on his threat, but ultimately decided not to do so. That was exactly what the criminal wanted to see: the Warden of Pandora's Vault broken down and vulnerable. Weak.

Unfortunately, Dream had already witnessed that, recently. His smiling, knowing face told him that. It was too late to go back. He just had to make sure not to stumble again going forwards.

"Have you thought about my offer yet?"

Sam turned around, and called the moving bridge back over from the opposite side of the lava lake.

"Alright then, we can work on that. What about my clock?"

"Forget about it. You're not getting one."

"Shame."

"It is," the Warden agreed, with no conviction whatsoever. The stone platform slowly made its way to him across lava chamber, pumped and pushed by the redstone mechanics and the pistons on the inside.

"Can I at least have a book to write in?"

"No."

"I already filled in all the others."

"That's your loss, and none of my concern."

Dream exhaled sharply, annoyed. "What am I supposed to do, then? I'm not going to "think about what I've done", am I?"

"Do whatever you want. I don't *care*."

"I meant everything I did, Sam. Every last, unforgivable action."

"Then you're more evil than I thought you were before."

"Go ahead, punish me all you want," Dream provoked him. "Give me the pettiest lectures you can think of! See if any of them work. They won't. I don't have to listen to you. I'm not your kid, Sam, and neither was Tommy."

The Warden spun around once again, his weapon out at the ready. The subject had been darted around for their entire conversation, and now it was here, Sam knew he would have to put up a fight.

Dream smirked, revelling in the Sam's reaction. "I'm sorry," he apologized with a mocking tone, "did I touch a sensitive subject?"

"You have no right to speak his name," Sam snarled, trident out, prongs ready to plunge into something.

Anything.

Preferably, into Dream's heart.

"I knew him longer than you did," the criminal taunted. "I fought against *and* with him. I have as much right to say what I think as the next man does."

"You murdered him in cold blood," Sam muttered. His grip tightened, knuckles turning white.

"And who was too absorbed in his duties to let that happen?"

The Warden faltered. The dark shadow of Tommy's death overcame him once more, and his chest tightened. The trident suddenly weighed tons in his grasp, as did the golden armour on his body. The air seemed to turn hotter, and he was suddenly aware of the sweat dripping down his skin.

"He probably hates you, wherever he is now. I too would despise the man who locked me up with his sworn enemy and expected everything to turn out peachy."

"You killed him," Sam said.

"You could have prevented it."

"You could have *not* killed him!"

"Do you really think I'd waste an opportunity to settle my own outstanding scores?" the prisoner scoffed. "Honestly, Sam, I thought you were smarter than that."

A small *thunk!* echoed through the air as the moving bridge halted at the edge of the cell.

The Warden glared at the criminal, and lowered his trident. His gear still seemed to weigh immensely, and his mind clouded over. Everything he did after that was done in a daze.

He left Dream alone in the darkened cell, and against his better judgement, turned his back to him. He said nothing—not a goodbye, no insult of any kind. Wordlessly, he jumped onto the bridge, and made his way back across the lava lake. The device creaked and groaned as the cogs and gears turned slowly, jolting it along in small bursts. Stray drops of lava dripped from the dispensers up above, some landing on Sam's skin and clothes and burning the surface like red hot needles. But still, he did not react, too preoccupied. Too broken.

Once he got to the other side, he turned around. The two, glistening points in the distance blinked, eerily attentive to his every move. Dream hadn't made any attempt to move in the slightest, even when there was the opportunity to sail away to freedom just by running faster than his Warden.

Sam swallowed hard, and looked away. Still in complete silence, he wrapped his hand around the nearby lever, and pulled. In one simultaneous movement, lava came gushing out of every single dispenser hooked to the ceiling. The entire room was being filled again. The curtain fell much faster than it had taken to disperse it, and Sam waited until he was sure that Dream could no longer see him.

When the thick veil of bubbling orange was back in place, he still kept staring across to where the holding cell was, surrounded by a piping hot barrier. Sam allowed his stance to slacken a little, and closed his eyes. He couldn't let any of this get to him the way it was.

He was the Vault's Warden. His job was to make sure Dream didn't escape, and he had succeeded. Perhaps certain sacrifices had to take place in order to do so, but that shouldn't have mattered. His primary goal had been achieved.

Sam screwed his eyes shut, and inhaled a few, shaky breaths.

Then why does it hurt so much?

The Warden of Pandora's Vault was a facade he had to keep up, his own mask—perhaps just as scary as Dream's. A stone cold, stoic figure with a heart of ice and nerves of steel. People were very much aware of its existence, and that was for the better. His threat was a silent one, and important enough to raise awareness. He couldn't let it crack. Not publicly, and not within the confines of the prison.

And whose fault was that?

*He probably hates **you**.*

It's all your fault.

You could have prevented it.

You left him to die.

With every snippet of guilt, the mask began to slip. Sam clenched a hand around the battered compass.

Dream. It was Dream's fault.

If he wasn't such a dangerous, power hungry monster, nothing would have happened. He wouldn't be in prison. Everyone would be at peace, and Tommy would still be here.

It was obvious! Everything was *always* Dream's fault. It was—

No. It was Tommy's.

His insolence and stubbornness knew no bounds, and he had provoked Dream multiple times inside the prison and out. He had it coming. He didn't listen to Sam or anyone else. He had *chosen* to keep visiting Dream. He was a silly child who rushed head-first into dangerous situations and he paid the price every time, without learning a single thing and kept on repeating his own mistakes. He—

The compass was flung against the obsidian wall. Loose parts tinkled to the ground, rolling around before coming to a halt.

Sam held his head in his hands. He slumped against the wall, and slowly sank down to the floor. His left shoulder was merely inches away from the wall of lava, and the edge of his dark green cloak was singed by the searing heat it brushed. His golden armour heated up, tearing at the flesh underneath his clothes and leaving thin, white and red burn scars wherever it could. He hunched his shoulders, trembling.

Sam tore off his gas-mask, desperate for air, chased away the horrible thoughts he had forced himself to create. The blame shouldn't have been put on the young boy. It wasn't Tommy's fault. It wasn't even Dream's fault, in a way. The prisoner had been open about his feelings and intentions when it came to Tommy's murder, and raised points that even Sam couldn't dispute.

"I too would despise the man who locked me up with his sworn enemy, and expected everything to turn out peachy."

Dream's mocking tone resonated in his ears, and he tried to block it out, in vain. He struggled to push down the tears welling up in the corners of his eyes. He had managed to control them throughout the past few days, and he had even started to venture into the stage of acceptance. That's what had given him the courage to come back into the holding cell in the first place.

Now, all that boldness and those healed emotions came crashing back down. He was back at square one. The Warden of Pandora's Vault had disappeared into thin air, and only Sam was left in his place. With his heart torn, the grief came back stronger than ever. The weight of both the frail body in his arms and the sturdy wooden coffin on his shoulders returned to haunt him.

It's my fault, it's always been my fault...

He looked up, his eyes moist, and stared in front of him. He froze when he saw the empty space on the floor where the compass' parts should have been. Suddenly taken over by a fit of panic, he leapt over to where it broke, and frantically began to search.

He immediately regretted everything.

"I'm so sorry, Tommy. I didn't mean to break it. I'll fix it, I promise..."

As time dragged on, he soon realized that his searching was hopeless. The remains of the compass were nowhere to be found.

It made no sense! There was no way it could have—

The Warden's body was suddenly filled with an impending dread. He slowly turned his attention to the lava.

No.

It couldn't have.

There was no other explanation.

Sam sank back down to the floor, letting his head hang. The only thing he had left of Tommy was gone. And again, it was his fault.

Four of the adults Tommy had trusted in his life had betrayed him. The fifth was probably the worst one of all.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed, trying desperately to hide his sobs from the villain behind the lava wall. "I'm sorry, Tommy..."

He didn't notice the pale, ghostly figure dart in front of him, hand cupped around star-like glimmers of dirty gold and glass.

Chapter Ten: A Special Place

There was a place stuck in the middle of numerous territories that many had forgotten about.

Forgot perhaps wasn't the right word, a more accurate term would have been "avoided". No attempts had been made to conquer its barren and ruined landscape, even though it was up for grabs. Whether it was because of the history or because it held no politically swaying use anymore, no one really knew. Nothing was really known about the reluctance many had towards so much as setting foot there. Everyone had their reasons, each as different as each other.

That was not the case mere months ago.

It used to be well known as a special place that churned out historically significant events non-stop, a safe haven where man and beast could go and emancipate, to escape the brutality and the tyranny of other questionable rulers. It had been driven by

promises of freedom under democracy, and an influence that stretched far beyond its borders. It was perhaps not the largest nation in these parts—less than a quarter of the size of the Greater SMP—but had been a prosperous one with a good economic balance, a strong and determined army, and a motto many could get behind without question regardless of their loyalty.

Now, all that remained of it was a hole in the SMP, both physical and metaphorical. A crater carved from explosions raining from the sky was all that remained of the once thriving nation.

The grassland on the edges of the chasm was barren and dry, crunching underfoot like dry autumn leaves. The remaining bushes that had survived the Doomsday War had kept growing, if only a little more sad-looking and moor-like. A few ruins still remained, scattered around the chasm like pebbles. Some were no more than small piles of rubble, or a couple of carved stones laying around. Others were halves of houses and small businesses, blown apart and crumbling on their foundations. Run down and overgrown by dry, crisp ropes of thorned briar, no one could have used them even if they had the time and resources to do them up and restore them to their former glory.

The crater itself stretched far, far down into the earth, jagged peaks and crumbling rock faces lining the sides like teeth down an alien gullet. Nature had begun to take its toll. Moss and spiky bushes clung to the stone. Lush green vines tumbled down over the ledges from above, hanging limply in mid-air and swaying gently in the wind. A couple of swallows nested in the cracks and crevices, flitting from wall to wall and chirping with piercing voices rebounding against the stone.

There was once a canal that ran through the nation too. It had once been used as a hydraulic power source and as a way to transport goods across the factions' territories and out into the sea. That water way was now completely gone. The only thing that remained of it was a silvery blue, powerful cascade gushing down the side of the crater, like melted snow winding down the mountains during the thaw. The waterfall crashed into a large lagoon at the bottom, shadowed around the edges by the steep walls and illuminated by the rays of sunlight shining down the middle of the gargantuan hole in golden showers.

The water sparkled, gently lapping the banks of a small, rocky island in the middle made up of fallen boulders and debris that once formed roads, homes and pillars.

Someone—no one knew who, and perhaps would never know—had planted a replica of the old L'Manberg flag onto the top of the mound. The design was barely visible, the

fabric hanging limply against the pole it was tied to, but it was nevertheless much appreciated by the ex-citizens of the country.

At the foot of the flagpole, red thorns and tendrils tangled and writhed. Sharp and menacing, they were fortunately confined to the island, but had however made the most of their predicament. The crimson vines seeped through the stones and boulders, tying themselves into thick knots. Shoots and growths darted up the flagpole, reaching their gnarled fingers up to the sky, piling as high as they could, an amalgamation of living, unsteady scaffolding reaching for the light.

Fundy sat right on the edge of the crater, his feet dangling out over the void. His matted orange fur rippled with copper glints in the sunlight and soft breeze, tail swinging gently from side to side.

His blue eyes stared down into the rocky depths below. Despite no one wanting to rebuild on L'Manberg's old soil, that wasn't to say that some people hadn't decided to exploit the land for what it still had.

Small, clandestine mining operations from the Greater SMP and the Badlands had set up shop at the bottom of the crater, digging into the walls to gather the exposed resources previously protected and squandered by the Soot, Schlatt and Tubbo Administrations. A couple of rogue fishermen floated out into the lagoon in small rowing boats, setting down nets and traps to catch the crawfish and small squids in the shallows.

The fox watched his feet sway over nothingness. His paws lay either side of him, inches away from his black cap and his gold-trimmed coat. His claws lightly dug into the dry grass, barely trying to stop him from falling. His white shirt stuck to his fur with sweat. Whether it was from fear or the heat, he didn't know, and didn't dare guess.

He let out a small sigh, his pointed muzzle twitching. He could still smell the copious amounts of gunpowder from Doomsday, sunken into the grassy ledges and poisoning the water far, far below him. Whether it was really there or if he was only imagining it, he did not know.

He flattened his ears against his head, and shuffled closer to the edge. The heel of his foot smacked part of the rock face. Small pebbles tumbled into the chasm. He was so far up he couldn't even hear the rocks fall into the water. The only things that reached his ears were the groaning and rumbling of the waterfall, the screeching swallows echoing below him, and the flashbacks of the bloodshed he had witnessed.

The day L'Manberg had fallen had brought chaos unlike anything anyone had ever witnessed. Even the battle of November 16th couldn't compare.

The sky was grey, and the weather was cold. The wind whistled, tearing through the landscape like the blade of a sword. Thunder rumbled overhead, and dry lightning cracked through the ether. The natural symphony was accompanied by the rhythmic booms and explosions raining down from above.

The crater was slowly, but surely, being formed underneath the feet of underprepared soldiers and warriors, taking many down in the process. Swords crashed against swords, shields against shields, and flesh against flesh as everyone fought the terrible dangers raining down upon them. Bloodthirsty cries echoed from the desperate fighters, and screams of the innocent citizens caught in the crossfire pierced the air as they frantically tried to escape the scene.

Black, three-headed creatures roamed the skies, hissing and shrieking like the hell-bent banshees of hell. There were so many of them, too many. Their multitude of combined heads searched the ground, and fired at anything that moved.

While hoards of untrained soldiers in iron armour, with at most some diamond cut weapons, rushed at the Withers, certain figures ventured and fought their own battles away from the main chaos that ravaged the center of L'Manberg's territory.

Tommy and President Tubbo scrambled over debris and dodged falling TNT to try and get to one of the sources of the problem: Technoblade. The piglin, sporting shining and hard netherite armour, kept slipping through their grasp, rushing around the battlefield to summon more Withers with his apparently endless supply of skulls, or to fire at and cut down any enemy that was close enough. His war cries roared above the carnage, his eyes veiled by the violent bloodlust that had taken hold of him. His golden headpiece glinted in the shine of the blazing lights, ironically crowning him the king of the hour.

Philza was practically invisible throughout the battle, darting through the catastrophe like a shadow of death. He never drew his sword, and instead concentrated only on the land's destruction itself. Taking a human life directly seemed to be too much for him to do, but taking a country and its government down... well...

He almost had more enthusiasm to do so than Technoblade himself did.

Finally, there was Dream. Dream was always there.

Perched on the narrow walkways criss crossing across the stormy sky and covering the entirety of the nation— scaffolding that had appeared overnight and without a sound— he watched the war rage on from behind his white mask and did his part.

Complicated yet compact redstone machines spewed out tons upon tons of lit dynamite, raining down on the poor souls below. Dream made sure they worked non-stop, making his job perhaps the least exhausting, but the most destructive. The symphony of the Doomsday he had orchestrated must have been ringing in his ears, and he obviously took a sick comfort in it.

Fires started as trees, homes and crops were set alight. The remains of the sacred L'Mantree smouldered in the distance, burnt down by Niki at some point during the battle.

It was known as a war, but it shouldn't have been qualified as such. The battle was clearly lost before it even started, and lasted a little less than a day. It was a massacre of life and legacy.

And Fundy?

Fundy had laughed.

He laughed long and hard, stood far away from the fight on a grassy knoll. He laughed so hard that his eyes welled up with tears. The combined smells of burning flesh, gunpowder, and fresh blood drove him crazy. The same smells and sounds from the two other wars he had fought in haunted him. They were the same, all three of them.

They were all fought in vain.

'It was never meant to be.'

His father's words once more haunted his mind.

Wilbur had known. He had known that the nation would never return to its former glory the moment he had pushed that button. He had known that November 16th was lost in advance, just like Doomsday now was. His own detonation had built a new, unstable era for his beloved country.

The unfinished symphony, forever unfinished.

Wilbur had known what he was doing. If he couldn't have it, no one could. It was the philosophy that had dragged him to his grave.

L'Manberg was doomed from that moment on, and it was only recently had Fundy realized that. When he did, he lost himself completely.

He sabotaged the L'Manbergians' supplies put aside for the war. He blew them sky high, with no remorse. All the weapons, all the gear, all the potions and food and medical supplies they had tirelessly managed to amass in the short twenty-one hours before the battle, gone with the wind.

They had nothing. They had no chance.

The fox fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face. Nothing mattered anymore. Everything he had cared about was gone. He closed his eyes.

'Can you finally be proud of me?' he had pleaded, ready to succumb to the mercy of his father's spirit, wherever it was.

But Wilbur never came. He never did come when his son called for him. He probably didn't take notice of him, even in death, as his once-beloved child laughed his lungs out alone.

Wilbur never did take any notice.

Fundy's laughs died down into a mess of angry growls and sobs. He remembered the horrified look in Niki and Ranboo's eyes when he had uttered the outline of his plan for that day. Treacherous words he had held on to all this time, yet never dared speak out loud before, and only came back when the realization of how insignificant he was had settled in.

Overlooked, shunned, and abandoned by everyone he latched on to. The agony drained him. He lost it. Fundy couldn't take it anymore.

He raised his head up to the stormy sky, just as rain began to hammer down on him, and he screamed. Long, hard and painfully. His orange fur was soaked through to his bones, dripping down his neck and over his eyes. He screamed his truth through the torrential rain until his throat was raw.

"If I can't make them smile, I'll make them cry!"

In response to his manic episode, the sky rumbled even louder, and three bolts of lightning flashed in quick succession. The downpour fell, much more violently than before.

Fundy closed his eyes, his warm tears mixing with the cold raindrops. His body trembled, a dangerous mix of desperation and anger rising within. He opened his mouth in a pained smile, exposing his pearly white, sharp teeth. He screamed again, stretching out his arms. His claws dug into his palms, close to drawing blood.

"I'll make them *cry*!"

Doomsday had never felt so far away, so much like a distant nightmare.

Fundy felt empty. He held no emotion as he looked out across L'Manberg, months after the war that destroyed it. He felt no remorse, as was expected, but he felt no gleeful joy either. The insanity he had been subject to had disappeared completely. But as it did, it had also appeared to suck out all other emotions.

Fundy had lost all ability to feel, to empathize with anything or anyone in the slightest. He felt as cold and mechanical as the redstone machines he had recently devoted all his time to.

This was the first time he had seen the outside world in a month. Since L'Manberg's final fall, he had locked himself in his home and in his private mine, working. Doing nothing but working.

No one came to see him, to check up on him. No one came to ask him if he was alright. He had been abandoned, yet again. This time, he didn't care.

No one cared about him, so he wouldn't care about anyone else.

The fox blinked slowly, gazing back down beneath him. The water was a long way down. A *long* way down. A few, jagged boulders lay in the shallows far below him. If he accidentally fell on them, he would break his back.

He shuffled closer to the edge. More rocks fell from the walls.

His tail swished from side to side. His eyes were vacant.

He didn't know what he was doing.

He was tired, oh so tired, of everything.

His breath hitched.

He began to slip—

"Be careful there, it's a long way down."

He froze. No one had spoken to him for months. Slowly, he turned his head, and squinted against the sunlight as a figure marched over to him.

For a moment, he didn't recognize the person who had addressed him but when he did, he still didn't make a move. In fact, he turned away, back to the crater. He didn't want to interact with them. He heard the newcomer sit down beside him with a large sigh.

"You wouldn't want to fall, would you?" the figure chuckled teasingly, gently nudging the fox's shoulder.

Fundy said nothing, and let his body be pushed around by the slight contact.

The newcomer clicked his tongue, his tone darkening. "Do you regret your actions now?" he asked.

'I don't, and I never will.'

Fundy didn't know if he was lying to himself or not. He quickly glanced around the edges of the massive crater, where the borders used to stand. "I miss the walls," he uttered hoarsely.

"Is that all you can say?"

The fox ignored him. "I miss when the walls were here." He stared up at the sky. "I was born within them. I played in their shadows. They were so tall and sturdy. They made us feel safe. Should I say any more?"

"Well, it doesn't matter now," the other sighed, somber. "The damage is done."

"The damage is done," Fundy echoed in a whisper.

The fox finally began to let the dizzying height of his perch sink in, and he gulped. Nausea racked his senses, and he struggled to push the impending taste of throw-up.

"And now it's gone."

"And now it's gone..."

One of the fox's hands slipped a little, and he swayed. He swiftly grabbed onto the grass to try and stay balanced. His tail stiffened, and his fur stood on edge. The void below

beckoned, like a gaping mouth wanting to swallow its meagre prey, its stone teeth ready to crunch Fundy's bones until there would be nothing left but dust and silky tufts of orange.

A hand shot out and grabbed the scruff of his neck, holding the fox in place. "But that doesn't mean you have to go with it."

"I don't have to go with it..."

His words were carried away by the breeze. Fundy finally locked eyes with the newcomer.

Quackity gave him a sad smile. "You're still my friend, Fundy," he said.

The fox didn't answer for a long time, his tongue tied. The words hit him hard, harder than a lot of things, and he choked down sobs. It wasn't an apology, and it wasn't forgiveness either. It was merely a statement, but a statement Fundy missed hearing. Those were the first words of comfort he had heard in a forever, and they brought him to tears.

"You're still my friend, Quackity..."

In a flash, Fundy was clinging onto Big Q like a lifebelt, bawling his eyes and sobbing his broken heart out into the folds of his jacket.

He didn't regret what he did. He had no remorse over what happened. L'Manberg had to go. He wasn't sorry, but he was touched by the misplaced, friendly loyalty Quackity still seemed to retain. He was too touched for his own good.

The tears flowed rapidly, tears of heart-warming comfort and thankfulness. The fox's claws dug into the sleeves, and he let himself be pulled away from the precarious ledge. His saviour held him tight, until they were at a safe distance from the edge of the chasm.

"We've been through so much together, and I won't forget that." Quackity continued. "No matter what you've done, you've been a good ally."

Fundy sniffled, then pulled away from his friend. Glimmering shards of light suddenly hit his vision, and he blinked at the jacket he was previously sobbing on.

"Big Q?" he asked, drying his eyes with the back of his hand. The nickname was odd to hear on his tongue after months of not even thinking of it. His ears pricked forwards, curious, and his eyes observed him up and down. "What are you wearing?"

Smiling his usual, cheerful smile, Quackity stood up, and gave his friend a classy little dance. Far from his usual, casual – sometimes...a little too casual – garments, Quackity had definitely decided to step his game up.

"Do you like it?"

Fundy was still taking in the change. His friend was wearing sparkling white clothes, from the long trousers and shoes to the linen shirt, adorned with silver and gold buttons and curved stitching. A red, silk sash was wound around his waist, matching the red handkerchief around his neck, and a blue jacket stretched down just below his bust. The fox dragged his eyes back up, meeting Quackity's gaze.

"Well?" his friend probed.

Despite the ornamental and rich clothes he was wearing, Fundy was still relieved to see that his trusty wool beanie still sat on top of his mop of black hair. He paused before replying.

"Y... Yeah!" he stammered briefly, before giving him a thumbs up. "Looks good on you."

Big Q grinned even wider, stretching the large, deep scar that ran from his jawline up to somewhere just above his eyebrow. The smile revealed a couple of fake, golden teeth moulded to replace the couple he lost to Techno's pickaxe. The mere thought of the Butcher Army set Fundy on edge, as he himself had once been part of it.

The Butcher himself would always bear the scar of the failed attempt at capturing The Blade.

"I'm glad to hear it!" Quackity laughed his shrill and loud laugh, ending with a high-pitched whoop of delight that bounced off the walls the crater below.

Fundy was still dumbfounded by the whole situation. For some reason, it had never occurred to him that he hadn't been the only one building a new life after L'Manberg. "How— I mean, why...?"

"Oh ho, Fundy... I've been waiting to tell you about it."

Quackity loomed over the fox with a smirk. His happy and cheerful demeanor had suddenly turned much more menacing, and Fundy shivered as a chill ran up his spine. He stared, wide-eyed into his friend's eyes. They were sparkling maliciously, and with a dangerous excitement that translated to a clear want to get Fundy's attention.

That was the moment that the fox realized that Big Q wasn't here for him or his safety or to comfort him. As usual, anyone who approached the fox was doing it for someone's own gains, and never for Fundy himself. His ears flattened against his head, and he let out a small whimper of betrayal.

"Really?" he coughed, trying to regain his composure and hiding his disappointment. His tail twitched nervously.

"In your current state, I think it's a good time to do so, don't you?" Quackity's smile was far from warm, yet it still somehow sparked an ember of trust within the fox. Quackity held out his hand. "Are you in?"

Fundy hesitated, and cast a nervous look behind him. The crater seemed even more inviting than before, but his curiosity took the better of him. The fox turned back to his friend, and nodded sharply.

He took his hand, and Quackity helped him up. "I'm in."

"It's a long journey," he warned him.

The fox hurried to grab his black jacket and his cap, flung carelessly on the ground. He put them on, and shrugged. "That's fine," he said, perhaps a little sadly. "I have nothing else to look forward to."

He was startled by two hands placing themselves on his shoulders. Quackity smiled again, and Fundy noticed how it was made a little crooked by the damaged side of his mouth.

"I'm glad to hear that, Fundy," he said. "I know you're not in the best place right now, but I'm certain that with a little luck, this can help you fight through it."

Chapter Eleven: One Day, I'll Fly Away

"...and I snapped. I snapped and I broke the compass."

Silence followed his story's conclusion.

"I..." Puffy fiddled with her fingers, looking down. "I... Are you alright? Now, I mean."

"I'm better," he replied with as much conviction as he could muster. "I just feel... empty, and possibly even more guilty than before. I'm back at square one. I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk about these sorts of things, especially since... since..."

Captain Puffy smiled softly back at him. "No, it's fine," she said, "honestly."

"I know I should try and move on, but..."

He stopped in his tracks. Puffy halted beside him. She shielded her eyes against the sun's blinding rays and blinked up at him, questioning.

"But?"

He shook his head and sighed. "I can't bear to let him go." His stomach dropped. "Not yet, and perhaps not ever..."

"That makes two of us." the sheep replied with a small, saddened chuckle. She didn't talk much about Tommy either and when she did, Sam could just feel and hear a hole in her. She was empty, just like him.

They continued down the pothole-ridden road. The cobbles were hard and uneven, arranged by colours in the shape of a strange and messy chessboard, with bouquets of weeds and veins of moss growing between the cracks. The sun blazed brightly above in the pale blue sky, and not a cloud shadowed the land. The heat beat down on Sam and Puffy's heads, roasting them alive, and they retreated to the edges where lines upon lines of stout pine trees cast cool, dark patches of shade onto the sizzling stones.

A sharp trotting sound echoed in the distance, and before long, a merchant cart pulled by two, muscular brown oxen passed by, loaded with bright yellow hay. One of the oxen snorted, only to be headbutted gently by its companion, their powerful shoulders hunching as they dragged the cart towards its unknown destination. The driver glanced at the two walkers as he passed, and stared for a good few seconds, perhaps in fear. He quickly tipped his hat, then went on his way. Puffy and Sam both returned the greeting, and kept walking.

"Nothing will ever go back to normal, will it?" Puffy sighed.

She was clearly still referring to the young boy's death, but the warden was slightly more preoccupied by their latest encounter with the hay cart. Sam swallowed hard.

"Did you see the way he looked at me?" he whispered despite himself. "Even without armour, he knows who I am. He knows what I've done..."

The sheep didn't reply. Sam could tell from the shift in her stride that she wanted to, but finding no words of comfort to counter his argument, she instead changed the subject. "At least the merchant routes are still working normally," she pointed out. "Not everything has stopped in its tracks."

"I don't know," the warden mused, worried. He looked up at the perfect sky, "everything seems too peaceful, like another war is about to break out..."

"The calm before the storm, you mean?"

"Perhaps..." He lingered a while, thoughtful. His expression hardened. "But not if I can help it."

"You mean not if we can," Puffy butted in, playfully shoving him with her hip. "I care just as much as you do, and I've seen what violence can do to people."

"You don't know half of what it can do," Sam replied harshly. "I'm sorry," he apologized soon after. "That was rude of me."

"You're forgiven. You'll always be forgiven. If we just forgive and forget, peace would be constant."

"Everyone's just too stubborn to admit they're in the wrong," the warden continued. Bad immediately crossed his mind as a perfect example. He tried to chase it away, in vain.

"That reminds me of someone I know."

Sam rolled his eyes and muttered a curse under his breath, quickly casting a nervous look around them. "I know what *will* cause a skirmish though."

"What?"

"If the Eggpire catches me with you," he replied, only to be met by a loud giggle.

"Oh no," Puffy sighed dramatically, "a couple of star-crossed individuals meeting far away, hiding their secret relationship far from the eyes of their rival houses!" She fell backwards into Sam's arms, earning a loud curse and a struggle to hold her up. She theatrically raised a hand to her forehead. "'Tis a story that can only end in tragedy!" She opened an eye, looked up at her friend, and winked. "Shakespeare liked to predict the future, didn't he?"

Sam raised his eyebrow, and scoffed lightly. He appreciated Puffy's attempt at making him smile, and he loosened up a little. "What do you expect me to do, serenade you on a balcony?"

"Why not?" the sheep joked right back, regaining her balance.

"That'll be the day." The two of them continued walking. "I'm just cautious."

Paranoid would have been a better fit, seeing how he kept looking around them, as if someone was going to suddenly leap out and tackle them both to the floor before slaughtering them. His hand nervously brushed the lightweight, short sword he had taken with him. Puffy may have managed to persuade him to drop his armour and his trusty trident for the day, but going on a trip without some sort of protection was a definite no.

He wrapped a protective arm around her waist for good measure, drawing a bleat of surprise from Puffy.

"This is actually going to end badly, isn't it? I was just joking..."

"As long as the Eggpire doesn't catch us together, we'll be fine," Sam told her, still keeping his grip on her, "but you're considered the number one threat."

"Really?" Captain Puffy puffed out her chest, smiling. "I'm honoured."

"You won't be when they hang you from the red vines and quarter you." He shuddered at the mere thought.

"Is that...? Did they say...?"

"No, no, they didn't say it, but it's been heavily implied that you're a wanted pirate, Puffy."

The captain nodded, confident. "I don't care," she said. "I will fight against the Egg until it's wiped from the face of this earth. I don't want any more of my friends to fall into its trap."

"Neither do I," the warden agreed. "I'll stand by you, and if Bad or Ant dare lay a finger on you, I'll make them regret it."

Puffy looked up and smiled, at first warmly and genuinely, then with a slight smirk. "Thanks, Romeo," she sighed in a sing-song voice, leaning up and giving him a quick peck on his cheek.

Sam rolled his eyes and shook his head, giving her a good shove. "You're unbelievable," he sighed as Puffy broke out into another fit of laughter.

A little more relaxed, the two of them went on their way, exchanging friendly banter as they walked. They followed the cobblestone road through the rest of the pine forest, until the fir trees became more and more scarce. The road turned sharply to the left, skirting the edge of the woods, and they abandoned its path to instead cut across a large expanse of farmland.

A sea of gold stretched before them, fields of ripe, wispy barley shining in the sun. The crops rippled in the sunlight and the soft breeze, casting glittering waves as far as the eye could see. It reached high up their bodies, but was still somewhat easy to navigate through – at least for Sam. Puffy was having a little more trouble, instead resorting to skipping by his side with the grace of a deer. They continued in a straight line, past farmers and their families who were busy harvesting armed with iron and copper sickles. The few who took notice of the travellers greeted them with loud cries and wide waving, before going back to gathering the barley or hoeing the land. The harvested crop was then piled on top of tall, rickety-looking carts where patient, chocolate coloured mules waited, their long ears and tails chasing away the flies, and their hooves the size of dinner plates pawing the ground.

A few young, mischievous children bolted past Puffy and Sam, stems, seeds and wild flowers tangled in their hair and stuck to their clothes. Their joyful screeches and laughter chimed in the warm air, and it made the two adults smile. That was, until the painful memory they tried to move on from came back to them, and their grins soon turned into saddened gazes.

Sam, upon seeing Puffy's shoulders sag, wrapped an arm around her back. "You alright?" he whispered, ignoring his own pain and pulling her close.

She quickly looked up at him, and nodded. "Yeah, I'm good." The sheep leaned into her friend's touch, seemingly trying to both give some comfort and receive some for herself. Her ears flattened against her head. "I'm good..."

The bright spectacle the fields of gold offered them had suddenly turned a sombre. The happy laughing sounded soon started to sound like mockery, jeering at the agonizing loss of brave, young and loved Tommy.

Before long, the barley gave away to another, different type of scenery. Sandy dunes tumbled down from the ripe fields onto a small plateau, dotted with dry clumps of grass. The captain and the warden carefully slid down the slope and stumbled into the new biome. From the hillside, the sand stretched down and out even further, joining an endless desert that had been previously hidden from their view. The cobblestone road was back again, this time merely a small sliver in the distance. It wound down the hill like a silky ribbon, ending at the arched gateway of a sandstone city.

The golden-white stone blended in perfectly with its surroundings and if it wasn't for the colourful traders and citizens bustling in and out of it, it may as well have been invisible. Heat waves blurred the horizon, making the cactuses and the building shake and quiver. Soft winds carried clouds of glittering sand across the larger dunes in the distance, and dry bushes cracked in the sweltering heat. A rogue coyote trotted along the outskirts of the desert, swiftly ducking into a hole when it saw the two figures staring down from the plateau.

Puffy sheltered her eyes from the blazing white sun, and sat down. She kept her gaze trained on the distance. "Bet you don't regret coming here now, do you?"

Sam blinked a couple of times, dazed by the view. "I certainly do not," he whispered in awe. He sat down next to the sheep. The soft grass gently brushed his arms and his clothes, and the warm sand ran between his fingers. "I've never seen it from here before..."

The "it" in question was indeed magnificent from this far away, only rivalled by the view from up close. The temple was colossal in size, made up of bricks that shone like pure gold and stretched high up to the heavens. The two, stocky, rectangular towers framed the wide entrance, sacred blue fires blazing on their tops in shallow, brass dishes standing on curved iron legs. A few colourful patterns painted themselves on its walls, depicting a myriad of ancient hieroglyphics and scenes from tales of ages past, and ornate statues of Egyptian deities guarded the threshold. Through the entrance, even from a distance, they could glimpse the inner courtyard, and the beautifully crafted

sphinx statue that took pride of place in it. An enormous pyramid stretched out at the back, partially hidden by the towers and topped with a point of pure gold.

The scene was breathtaking, and for a while, Puffy and Sam gazed out across the desert in silence. The sun's blinding rays continued to hammer against their scalps, but Sam didn't take any notice, and Puffy was already protected by her woolly fleece and her tricorn.

"The temple was threatened, not that long ago," the warden decided to reveal all of a sudden.

The sheep turned to him. "Threatened? What do you mean?"

"The Eggpire," he replied. "They threatened to blow it up if Foolish didn't bow to the Egg."

Puffy let out a scoff, shaking her head. "Do you mean to tell me that Bad tried to threaten a *god*?"

"Foolish didn't tell you?"

"He never mentioned it," she replied with a shrug. "How did that get resolved?"

"With Foolish almost smiting them. I was there... It was—"

"Scary?"

"To say the least. I didn't expect that sort of dangerous power from, well... from *him*."

"That was stupid of them," Puffy interjected. "I mean, what on earth gave them the courage to do that?"

Sam cast her a sideways glance.

"Right, yeah, the Egg..." the sheep sighed. "I know, but still..."

"Either they're stupidly brave," Sam said, "or the Egg is much more powerful than we realize, and they know it."

Silence followed his words, and tension filled the air. Puffy's cheerful and confident attitude towards the Eggpire faltered, and what she said next were words filled with dread. "So, we *should* actually be worried..."

"I don't know," the warden admitted, bitter. "I'll try and find out what I can. They still think I'm one of them."

"Does the Egg still speak to you?"

"Sometimes."

He suddenly took note of his surrounding sounds. The whispers weren't there, in fact, they weren't even present as their usual background noise. They seemed to have temporarily vanished. He said nothing about it. They would obviously return. Perhaps they simply allowed him to spend some time with his friend, in the peace and quiet. Perhaps the Egg had some sort of clemency—

What am I doing? he gasped, chasing away the indoctrinating thoughts.

"What has it been saying?"

"Gibberish," he replied sharply. "I can't understand a thing."

"Good, that's good."

"Why?"

"I'm pretty sure that means you're not influenced."

Sam felt his body relax. "I hope so."

He honestly wasn't sure. He still heard the voices every so often, even if he couldn't understand them. The Egg still had some sort of hold on him and although it wasn't as serious as it was with everyone else, it was still there. It was always present

Watching, waiting, and quite possibly, listening.

A loud screech made them look up, just in time to see a flock of spindly-legged seagulls dart over their heads. They veered around the golden sun, and headed back the way they came, to a fine line of blue to the west. The boats looked minuscule, like mere toys in the distance as sailed into the harbour, or sailed out to distant lands.

Captain Puffy's gaze lingered on the thin line of ocean for a while, a powerful yearning radiating from her. Sam leaned in towards her, sensing something was up.

"Puffy?" he called softly. She looked miles and miles away.

The sheep lay down on her back. Her tricorn fell off her head, and the soft, powdered sand got caught in her fleece. Her sparkling eyes gazed up at the heavens, whimsical. "Have you ever wanted to just... leave?"

The warden was surprised by the sudden question, and hesitated. He leaned back, until he too was lying down. The warm ground was therapeutic, and he sighed. "Not particularly."

"Well, I have." She raised a hand to the clear sky, painting an imaginary picture. "One day, I'll fly away from here. On a sea-worthy vessel, with the wind in my sails, the hull full of supplies, and no regrets."

It sounded truly magical, but it still made his gut twist and his stomach sink.

Sam's throat tightened, and his next sentence slipped out without him realizing, and with no time to retract it.

"I can't lose you too."

The silence that followed was deafening, save for the whistling of the wind, the screeching of the gulls and the singing of the cicadas in the barley fields behind them. He didn't look at her, but he heard her breath hitch.

The warden immediately regretted his words. "I didn't mean it like that," he apologized, for the second time that day.

"I know you didn't," Puffy replied softly. She gave him a playful nudge, lightening the mood again. "I'm not going to leave anytime soon, don't worry. There are too many people and causes that need me, and everything I care about is here. But I will, one day. I will."

"And I won't stop you when you do, I promise." He looked over, only to be greeted by a smirk. He frowned. "What?"

She laughed. "This conversation is turning a little cheesy, don't you think?"

Sam blinked his black and green eyes, unimpressed and a little hurt. "Stop saying that each time I'm being honest..."

"You sound offended and lovesick."

"*Lovesick*? I'm not lovesick, I'm serious!" he protested.

"Sure you are... Have *you* ever thought of leaving these lands? I mean, seriously leaving. Like, you prepare a pack and put it at the foot of your bed. Tomorrow will be the day you'd leave, you tell yourself. Then, you sleep on it, and wake up. You don't go. You can't go, but the thought still lingers."

Sam didn't know how to reply. "I did leave these lands, actually," he told her.

The sheep's eyes widened. "Really? How come you never told me?"

"Because it wasn't important," he lied. "It's in the past, it was an impulse, and when I came back, nothing was the same. I don't want that to happen again."

He propped himself up on his elbows, staring out into the distance. The sandstone city sparkled. The desert used to be such a dangerous place, only populated by rogue bandits and committees of vultures that picked at the rotting carcasses of poor, dehydrated devils.

Those times were dangerous, yes, but far less than they were now. The dangers and worries were simpler concerns. His memories took hold of him, and began to pour out like a waterfall.

"I was in the SMP when it all began, before all the factions and the lands were divided. I remember when hunting for your own food was the norm; when you were lucky to have successfully grown single patch of crops; when small villages were a day's walk away from each other with nothing in between; the era when the Greater SMP was just a wild landscape; when L'Manberg was just a small forest; when there were no wars, no tensions. Just... the wilderness."

It was somewhat terrifying how all these rich, advanced civilizations sprung up so quickly, in less than a few years. Progress was indeed both a blessing and a curse when it came to these kingdoms and nations.

Sam remembered the beginning of civilization in this vast expanse of land well. He remembered his youth, when he was barely out of his teen years and was an impulsive,

sometimes stupidly brave, young man. He had come across a small group of people who had started to create a community settlement in the wilderness, with only a couple of secluded small villages for company. He remembered getting to know them and seeking shelter with them. They became his family.

Ponk, Alyssa, Callahan, Bad, Sapnap, George, and Dream – or Clay, as he used to be known as.

Everything was so peaceful back then. The days were spent hunting, farming, building, and gathering resources. Sam always held the memories of the beginning fondly: sparring with Sapnap in friendly duels, having hilarious conversations with Ponk, taking beautiful walks along the coast with Alyssa, and the late evenings spent beside an open campfire, stargazing the night away as a group. There was friendly bickering, but nothing that could qualify as a war or serious argument. There were no factions, no designated territories.

Just *them*, the eight of them, building a peaceful life together.

It was during that beginning period that he had started experimenting with a strange new ore called "redstone" Bad had pulled up from their little mine one day. He had never seen something quite like it before. The powder could be used to power and create marvellous machines, light up lamps and even be make weapons if connected and lit correctly. It fascinated him, pushing him to spend days on a single system, with help and input from his friends. There was so much potential to it! So many mechanical marvels could be created, and all for the greater good.

The greater good, for everyone. That was one of the main foundations of his morals.

"You've been cooped up in that mine for ages," Clay had pointed out one day when his friend resurfaced after days spent below the surface, red dust staining his clothes and fingertips.

"I've been busy," Sam had replied, snatching up the dead pheasants from the day's hunting trip, ready to pluck them for roasting that night.

Clay laughed, his mouth drawn up into a cheerful, yet exasperated, grin. "You need to see the sunlight at some point."

"Where do you think I am now?"

"I mean, really."

"Clay, please," Sam had exclaimed. "I think I'm onto something. Just a little more time, and I'll make a breakthrough!"

His friend sighed, and sat down beside him. The wooden paths leading to the Community house shone in the sunset, the lake below gently lapping their supports. He grabbed one of the birds, and began removing the feathers. The loud cries belonging to George and Ponk rose into the air, as the two held a swimming competition on the far side of the lake. From the desperate, high-pitched screams and Sapnap's yells of encouragement from the bank, it had clearly turned into Ponk trying to drown George. A couple of the plucked feathers fell into the water, gracefully floating on the top and attracting the attention of the fish.

"It's becoming an obsession," Clay had warned him. "This red stuff. There's a fine line between interest and obsession, and you're hopscotching right over it."

"What do you mean? I'm just trying to—"

"I know you are, just don't forget about us when you're searching for answers, eh?"

Sam smiled back, and nodded. "I promise I won't," he told him, "but I *can't* promise that I'll stay here to find them."

"And none of us will stop you if you choose to venture off," Clay had replied, carefully patting his friend's back.

So Sam had decided to leave. He left to seek answers, to push the redstone's abilities to their limit. His friends had been surprised at his desire to leave, but had ultimately understood, and had wished him all the best. As Clay had predicted, no one tried to stop him. Sam promised to come back as soon as he could. He thought that the expedition would take a year or so at the most.

That single year turned into two, then three, then four, and then time seemed to fly away.

He had found the answers he had been searching for quite quickly, in another realm far away. What he hadn't expected was the sheer amount of knowledge he had to learn, practice and remember. Redstone was far from being an easy ore to control and use. The long years of studying with other like-minded engineers were necessary – indispensable even – to understanding this red dust and its effects.

The thought that pushed Sam forward was the promise of returning to his friends and their nearby village, and being able to put his new found skills to good use, but even he himself had been sceptical if he was ever going to see them again. That was what made his return even more surprising to everyone.

Sam had returned to the soil he had left seven years ago – now stronger, more cautious and built differently – but he barely recognized it. Certain structures had remained, such as the Community House he had helped build and the farmland around it, but a lot of other things had changed.

Namely, the addition many newcomers, and many problematic ones at that. But his old friends had also changed, some for the worst.

Dream, the old friend he used to stick close to, the leader of the original group, had become a monster, obsessed with power – and, oddly enough, two measly music discs – as well as bringing down anyone who challenged him, even if that included an entire nation. He barely showed his face any more, very much unlike when Sam had first met him. Now, a smiling mask was almost constantly hiding his facial features, a necessary piece of armour that unsettled everyone who came across him.

Sapnap had made a terrible name for himself with crimes such as arson on multiple forests and homes, and a pet murder spree, or so Sam was told. He now had a general reputation for being a brute with a heart of stone, and the ability to bench press mountains.

Bad had remained quite passive in the general sense, staying out of the big conflicts and only serving in the ones that benefited him and his new clan, known simply as the Badlands. It was the one that Sam joined and helped form, if only to remove himself from any serious conflict that might have hurt anyone he cared about.

He saw little of Alyssa and Callahan, and perhaps it was for the best in the long run, in the hell scape that had taken over.

That wasn't to say that he was shunned or hunted. His original eight friends welcomed him back with open arms, trying to catch him up on what he missed and wanting to know more about his own adventures, which he rarely divulged. He wasn't hated in the slightest. If anything, they were impressed by his resilience and newly found skills, as well as touched by his loyalty to them.

L'Manberg, Manberg, Pogtopia, the Greater SMP, the Badlands... All those new names and factions had muddled his brain at first, causing him to retreat to a northern

hideaway of his own making, escaping the stories and changes he didn't want to come to terms with.

Building defences was the first thing he used his redstone knowledge for, to his dismay. Not effective farming, not any new means of mining – just defences. More particularly, a hidden door leading to a secret, bunker-like home under a mountain. It was still there today, and still used. He would grind for hours on end, sometimes with no rest, getting as many resources as he could, as many ores as the earth could provide, as many weapons as he could craft. Chests upon chests soon filled with diamonds, gold, iron, and of course, redstone.

News of his engineering talents and large treasure trove spread like wildfire, and before he knew it, he was the most sought after person in the area. He spoke to the President of Manberg at the time, Schlatt, who with Dream demanded weapons and armour for an upcoming war, and soon after, he was asked the same thing by a group of underground revolutionaries, led by a man who's explosive plans were no secret.

He had thought that that fatal day of November 16th was the first and only war he would have to go through, but he was wrong. So wrong.

"Wow..." Puffy's voice interrupted his train of thought, and he snapped back to the present.

"Wow, what?"

"You're talking like an old person!"

"I am not!" he exclaimed, offended.

"Old," the sheep hummed, earning her a kick through her giggles. "That must have been quite a time..."

"It was, and I miss it," the warden sighed. "Obviously, many good things have happened since then, but a lot of bad things have as well. They sort of cancel each other out, if you know what I mean."

"But *have* you ever thought of leaving again?" Puffy asked, persistent.

She made it clear that she was genuinely intrigued. That was a difficult one to answer, as the conversation came full circle.

"I'm torn," he confided. "One on hand, I miss the travelling and the feeling of total freedom. I could sleep where I wanted to, hunt whatever I pleased, I didn't have to pay attention to borders, and I passed through so many beautiful places... On the other hand, I agree with you: everything I care about is here. I have the Vault, I have my faction and my home. I have people that need my help. I have—"

He trailed off, then corrected himself in a whisper.

"I *had* Tommy, and my friends, including you. I had promised I'd return when I had found the answers I was looking for, and now I'm here. I need to keep my word, it's my duty."

"Your sense of duty will be your downfall, Sam," the captain warned him. Her tone had turned much more serious. It was a little frightening.

The wave of grief submerged Sam's senses again, and the hole in his heart burned, reminding him that it was still there, and would probably always be.

"It already has been..." he whispered, hoarse.

Chapter Twelve: Moral Compass

The soft whooshing of the portal hummed in Puffy's ears as she entered, and the purple plasma dulled her senses. In a blink, she stumbled out the other side, nauseous. The mellow warmth of the desert had been replaced by scorching heat, and Puffy already felt the collar of her captain's uniform tighten and sweat beads start to trickle down her back. The world span before her, and she grabbed the closest thing she could reach for balance, which in this case happened to be her friend's arm.

"You alright there?" Sam asked, stepping out beside her.

The sheep nodded slowly, but she still kept her grip on him until she was ready. The nausea died down, and her senses soon returned. She bent down, her hands on her knees. Her vision cleared, and she found herself staring at the cobblestone floor. Otherworldly, blue fungus grew between the stones, along with small, orange speckled mushrooms.

"I just haven't been through a portal in a long time... I forgot how dizzy they made me..."

"Maybe you need to go to the Nether more often," the warden suggested. "Get used to the feeling."

"And never see the beauty of the Overworld again? No thank you. The roads there are much more to my liking..."

"I can see why."

She slowly raised her gaze from the floor, swatting her friend's helpful hand away, and stood up straight. The stuffy heat beat down on the two of them, and the echoes of the cavernous world greeted them. Lava bubbled and popped in pockets from behind the walls, the lakes and the cascades. Golden fire crackled on the floor, spitting angrily at anything that moved. The dark red netherrack stretched as far as the eye could see, looming in jagged pikes over the construction going on underneath.

Sharp noises punctured the air in rhythmic staccato. Pickaxes were brought down on the soft, red rock and cartloads of hard stone trundled by. Workers hurried left and right, carrying back loads of gold ore and freshly broken cobbles, ready to store in a nearby safehouse or to continue building the viaduct that lay before the portal.

Puffy and Sam weaved their way through the builders, and headed straight on over the bridge. It started on the netherrack floor, then increasingly jutted out until the pathway rested on nothing but sturdy stone pillars anchored into the lava below. It was astounding how such a heavy, imposing structure managed to stay upright and solid.

"They're moving quickly," the sheep noted, gazing around her.

Sam agreed with a nod. "They are, because now they have the time to."

"Time?"

"No wars to slow down progress."

"Oh, right."

Puffy raised her eyes to the higher peaks and paths above them, carved into the red stone. Standing at the edge of a particularly sharp edge, a small group of stocky, battle scarred piglins glared down at the construction site, their trotters tightening around their golden swords and their crossbows. Low, angry grunts were just about

audible, and their sharp tusks gleamed in the firelight. Their eyes were blazing with a fiery rage, looks as piercing as the arrows they used to defend themselves.

No wars yet, perhaps. If the factions weren't going to stir up their own, the Nether's inhabitants just might.

"Puffy?" Sam looked back, and soon followed her stare. An air of worry painted his face when he saw the hostility of the onlookers, but he ended up ushering her along, almost brushing it off. "Let's keep going."

The sturdy, cobblestone floor continued to stretch out before them, with iron railings that looked out over the sea of orange. Puffy moved closer to the edge, and touched the metal. It sizzled, and she leapt back as it burned her hand. Rubbing her palm, she gazed out over the lava. Hell was indeed the only way to accurately describe the Nether.

The lake below them burned brightly, popping and guzzling. It was alive, like a patient creature waiting in the depths for its next victim to fall down into its jaws. Vacuous magma cubes of different sizes lounged on the banks, and floated like dead wood in the depths.

A little further in the distance, a small Nether patrol kitted out in diamond armour and axes trotted on top of the burning floor, sat astride on stout, two-legged creatures with large mouths and boil-ridden, leathery skin. Their bulbous, frog-like eyes goggled left and right, and they waddled along in zig-zags, like a flock of unstable ostriches. They let out little, pulsating croaks as they wobbled along but miraculously, the soldiers managed to stay upright in their saddles, and kept a good control on their steeds. A few wild specimens of these odd creatures decided to add themselves into the mix, until the small patrol had turned into a jellied herd coursing over the lake.

"Have you ever ridden a strider?" Puffy asked her friend, watching the patrol scamper by.

Sam stopped beside her, and leaned on the railing. His green sleeves seemed to protect him from the searing metal, and he gazed out across the lake. "Once," he said, then made a face. "It's a terrifying experience."

"Really?" The sheep leaned against the railings as well, making sure her skin was protected this time. "How so?"

"The way they walk feels like they're going to tip you off into the lava at any given moment," the warden explained, his eyes not-so-subtly hiding the less than reassuring memories that seemed to be dancing across his mind. "It didn't help that the magma cubes wanted to get in on the action either. I was almost crushed to death."

"That would have been an interesting story to tell," Puffy bleated with laughter.

"Embarrassing, you mean," her friend snorted. "I would never live that down..."

"Well, we all need to be humiliated at least once in our lives," she laughed.

"I'd prefer if it didn't involve me dying, however."

Captain Puffy was suddenly curious. "How many lives do you have left?" The question was blurted out automatically, and it startled them both.

"I prefer not to say," he replied, perhaps a little sternly.

"Oh... That's fine." The sheep stared back out across the way. "I was just wondering..."

"I trust you, Puffy," Sam was quick to say, "I do, but I'm the Warden of the Vault. Information like that needs to stay private, for everyone's safety, and I don't want them going after you if I tell you."

"Them? Who's them?"

The warden gestured around vaguely. "No one, everyone, anyone," he listed, then sighed. "I don't know, just anyone that might want to do something to the prison."

It was all about security measures, in the end. But if that meant that everyone was safe and if it could stop any chaos from starting, then Puffy was willing to bend to her friend's will. Pandora's Vault had to stay secure, whatever it took. It was of the utmost importance – even if a small fragment of trust had to be broken between her and her friend.

Then again: *"I don't want them going after you if I tell you."*

"Thank you, Sam."

He looked confused. "Thank you?" he repeated. "Thank you for what?"

"For looking out for me, and for everything you've done for us," Puffy replied simply. She looked up at him. "You've got a good heart."

The warden immediately declined the compliment with a shake of his head, and a slouch of his shoulders. "I've done nothing but bring misery upon so many."

"We both know that's not true."

"We both know it is—"

"Hey! You two!"

A furious shout made them both look back the way they came. An angry looking gentleman dressed in dusty, scruffy clothes marched towards them, pointing a podgy, accusing finger at them. The outline of his silhouette was lit by the purple shadows from the Nether portal behind him, framing his figure.

"Oh boy," Puffy sighed, standing up straight.

Sam patted her shoulder. "I'll deal with this," he offered in a whisper, then spoke in a louder tone. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"What do you mean, 'is there a problem?'" " the newcomer fumed, his steel capped boots clicking on the cobblestone. He angrily pushed his tangled, dark hair out of his face, then wiped his burnt, dusty hands on his charred leather clothes. "Of course there is! The site is off-limits!"

"Wow, he's more demanding than Sam Nook," Puffy smirked.

The builder wasn't done with his sermon. "Leave immediately, or I'll have you both escorted off to Pandora's—"

He stopped as Sam turned to him, raising an eyebrow. The man's tone immediately changed.

"—Vault..." he finished, his voice strained. "I beg your pardon, I didn't... I mean..." He struggled to find his words, and accidentally tripped over an uneven cobble on the path.

The warden walked towards the builder, meeting him halfway across the bridge. "No offense taken," he grinned.

The captain began to wonder how many people this man had threatened to send into the prison's "care". She trotted lightly across the stones like a jumpy little lamb, and soon caught up with her companion. Entertained, she watched the exchange with furtive excitement, and wide, sparkling eyes.

Sam continued, "We're apparently trespassing, and there's no excuse for that."

The stranger laughed nervously. "I mean... I wouldn't have dared say anything if I knew..." The man glanced at Sam up and down. "You usually have the... the armour and the trident and the..." He shakily gestured across his own face. "...and the mask..."

The warden cast his woolly companion a sideways glance. "As I said, no offense taken," he forgave the gentleman again. "Captain?"

"Yes?" The sheep perked up, smiling.

"I think this man wants us to leave the site."

Puffy nodded in agreement. "We're sorry to have disturbed you," she said.

"No, no, it's not that," the man stammered, still taken aback. He pointed to the distance. "We just haven't finished the path yet. There's no way over yet, and we don't want any... complaints if someone falls in."

The two of them followed his pointed finger. Much further over the lake, the cobblestone and iron railings suddenly stopped, replaced by a thin, precarious bridge of unstable scaffolding.

"Is there a way around?" Puffy asked. Despite her love for the Overworld routes, she did not fancy another trip through the Nether portal unless she really needed to.

The builder thought for a moment. "Well, there is a small path that runs around the edge of the lake." He quickly beckoned them over to the railings, and traced the banks of the lapping, bubbling lava. "It leads straight to the Snowchester exit."

"That's perfect," the sheep grinned, optimistic.

Her companion was noticeably more sceptical. "Have there been any disturbances?" he questioned.

"Disturbances?"

"Dangers." His lack of armour in the burning dimension, and in general, still clearly and deeply troubled him. "Anything we should worry about?"

The builder thought for a moment. "We haven't seen any ghastrs for a while, and the magma cubes seem to stay on the furthest points or in the lake itself. Nothing really lives in that area. All in all, it's safe."

They all knew that to be a lie, as nothing was a hundred percent safe in the Nether.

Captain Puffy watched as Sam's hand crept around the hilt of his sword and his jaw clenched as he noticeably tried to stay composed.

"We'll be fine, right Sam?" she said brightly. "We've faced worse."

Much worse...

He grumbled out an answer.

"Then farewell, and safe travels," the builder bid them courteously, with a small bow, "and feel free to stop by at any time. We might need a little help to get this done as soon as possible and avoid more... misunderstandings."

With one last look, he strode back to the main part of the construction site, and raised his pickaxe back over his head, bringing it down on the new batch of stone that had just arrived.

"Huh, seems like being the Warden has its advantages," Puffy noted. "I thought he was going to throw us over the side."

Sam still seemed much less enthusiastic. "People fear me," he muttered, his spirits lowered. "They're scared of me."

"You were grinning through the whole thing!"

"Of course I was. Imagine what would have happened if I didn't." Before Puffy could say anything, Sam had dragged her over to a rocky slope. "Let's follow the trail."

Treading carefully, the duo slid down the dusty, red hill. Their hands burned from the friction and the burning rocks, but they carried on through it until they reached the bottom. Small, stray flames peeked out from between the netherrack, charring their skin and their clothes, and even when they reached the bottom, the singed bits still smouldered.

Puffy hastily patted parts of her fleece to try and put the burning out, and cursed as some of her brown and white curls turned to black.

When Sam had looked back at to see what the matter was, she shook her head, "It'll grow back.

"I wasn't inquiring about your beauty routine," he hummed, smirking as she shot him a dirty look.

A battered track lay out before them, following the jagged, twisted banks of the lava. Waves of burning magma gently lapped the shores, and clouds of red dust formed underfoot. High above them, the viaduct loomed, its imposing stone legs casting large shadows over the path.

Despite the need to get back, both of them stared upwards in awe. Even Sam seemed impressed, and *he* had created an even bigger and much more structurally sound build. "Look at it," he whispered.

Puffy nodded. "It's huge... I just hope that it stays upright, for everyone's sake."

Her friend peered across the lava. "Imagine more of these," he pictured out loud. "All over the Nether."

The sheep hesitated. The fiesty, hostile glares of the piglins burned through her head once more. "I don't think I want to..." she replied, dragging her gaze away from the bridge.

Sam seemed to know exactly what she meant. "Me neither..."

The boy wasn't a thief.

At least, he didn't think he was. He didn't *feel* like a thief. He didn't mean any harm when he did what he did. He didn't take it for his own gain. He didn't *think* he did... He had acted automatically, impulsively.

He didn't really understand what it was. When he had collected it, it was a broken mass of metal and glass. The impact against the wall had dealt a good deal of damage to it. The boy's fingers were numb, and he picked up each piece ever so carefully. He held them up to his eyes, and scrutinized them. A couple of times, his digits slipped or stiffened, and the gear or the screw would fall back to the floor and bounce away.

Determined, he'd lunge for it, and try again. He picked up each piece three or four times, and lay them to the side again. The cycle repeated.

That was, until he tried slotting two gears together. They fit perfectly, and the boy could sense he was getting somewhere.

Soon enough, he was thrown into a spiral of obsession. Hunched over on the hard, dark floor, he lay out all the parts, and had since spent hours poring over them. He soon identified the main base for the strange device: a golden, circular container. Everything else seemed to be made to fit inside. In what order, he wasn't sure.

Pieces that he put together seemed to work at first glance, only to find that one small screw didn't fit, and so he had to take it all apart again. Some he even tried to jam together by force, earning him nothing but failure and a hard time pulling them apart.

It was a mysterious puzzle, and one that he had set his full attention to. The world around him faded into nothingness, and although the cosy, warm lava to his left beckoned him to curl up and doze in its soft folds, the drive he had to complete his task kept him on track. He stayed put in the obsidian chamber.

He wasn't a thief.

He was trying to help. He *knew* he was trying to, and mused over who it would benefit. Maybe it was to help the armoured figure he had trailed... The man was searching for the remains of the puzzle after he had thrown it against the wall. The boy felt a sense of guilt peak as the stranger's emotions had overwhelmed him. He knew that the stranger had never found the broken pieces. Were they important to him?

Was the boy a thief?

"Here."

The boy jumped, startled at the sound of the voice. He craned his neck, and looked over his shoulder. Basking in the mellow glow of the lava, a silhouette was crouched down behind him, holding out his hand. Something small and shining lay in the figure's palm.

The boy blinked a couple of times, then looked up at the stranger's face. His eyes were kind and warm, far from holding the malicious glint he had seen before. His face was framed by a curtain of long, greasy blond hair, knotted together in thick, rigid

strands, and his cheekbones dipped in, accentuated by the shadows on them and under his eyelids.

"You dropped this," the man smiled again, shuffling closer.

The boy didn't move at first, his gaze darting from the golden glint up to the stranger's eyes again.

The man let out a low chuckle. "I don't bite," he assured the boy. "I just want to give this back."

The boy hesitated again, then slowly reached out. His pale, see-through fingers closed around the gear, and brushed the stranger's skin.

The man bristled a little, but didn't shy away. He watched as the boy stared at the gear, then turned his back to him and returned to his mysterious puzzle. "I can fix that if you want."

The boy didn't answer, or even acknowledge the offer.

"You're not very talkative."

The boy wanted to reply, he really did, but the pain in his throat stopped him. He resigned himself to shaking his head.

"That's alright," the man sighed, "I'm used to the silence." He sat down, cross-legged on the cell floor, and held his chin in his hand. "That's not where it goes," he told the boy as he shoved the lost gear wherever he could fit it.

The boy looked at him, frowning. His eyebrows darted down, and he let out a breathy huff.

The man quickly raised his hands in defence. "Alright, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I won't question your thought process."

Good. The boy returned to his work. Huffing again, he quickly removed the misplaced gear. *Who are you?*

"You've been here a while, haven't you?"

The boy shrugged. He didn't know. He didn't care. All he wanted to focus on was the damn gadget in his possession. It was starting to get immensely frustrating, and his hands began to shake with a rising fury.

The stranger seemed to turn a blind eye to his anger, and continued. He craned his neck upwards, his dirty hair falling down his back. "I sensed you. That other time."

You sensed me... What does that mean, exactly? The gears escaped his shaking fingers again, and clattered to the floor.

"I couldn't see you at first," the stranger continued, thoughtful. "I knew someone was there, though. I just didn't think it would be... you." He paused again, before continuing. "Turns out, I just had to look harder."

Suddenly, something clattered at his feet. The man dragged his gaze down, and blinked at the mess of parts someone had abandoned there. His battle-scarred face curved up into a small smirk, and his eyes searched the black room for the boy. Eventually, he found him sitting on the other side of the cell, facing the splatter mark, with his knees pulled up to his chest, and his head down.

The frustration and seething anger amused the man, and his smirk grew wider. Wordlessly, he gathered up the discarded pieces, and set to work. "You're a temperamental kid, aren't you?" he called out after a few moments.

The boy refused to reply, his stubbornness getting the better of him. He decided to keep sulking. His grip tightened on his legs, and his eyes stared vaguely into the dark abyss in front of him. He wouldn't give the stranger even more satisfaction than he already had. His fists balled up. He *wouldn't*. The red spots were back again, twirling around his vision. Dots of crimson and wine created strange shapes and swirls on the black canvas in front of him, and despite his unexplained hatred for them, the boy forced himself to watch.

He tried to ignore the clinking metal behind him, he really did. He narrowed his eyes, concentrating on the red ballet before him, and tried to focus his ears on the bubbling lava.

Nevertheless, after a minute or two of abstinence, he shot a look behind him. The stranger was hunched over the remains of the device, and looked to be hard at work. The boy couldn't get a perfect view, but he could make out a few things.

The way the man's fingers were so quick and nimble was strangely mesmerizing. They moved in a blur, his digits swiftly assembling the rounded object that lay before him, undoing the boy's petty mistakes and reconnecting the gears and springs correctly. His locks of blond hair fell in front of his eyes, and he brushed them away ever so often. The stranger must have felt a pair of eyes on his back, as he turned around to look.

The boy immediately turned his gaze away, back to the wall.

"I know you're watching me," the man said. "It's... a little creepy, if I'm being honest."

No I'm not. The boy didn't turn back.

The stranger let out a low chuckle, and returned to the repair job laid out before him. "You never told me your name," he reminded the boy.

I can't, even if I knew or wanted to. He continued to hug himself, bitter. *I don't even know who you are...*

"I'm known by many names," the man began, in a scarily accurate answer to the boy's silent question. The boy waited for him to go on, but he didn't. At least, not immediately.

The man stood up with some difficulty, and leaned on the wall for support. His figure was thin, and almost skeletal in nature. His legs trembled ever so slightly, and he took a moment to catch his breath. The orange shirt on his back was torn and stained, by liquids unidentifiable at first glance.

He briefly closed his eyes, and muttered something under his breath. His overgrown fingernails dug painfully into the palm of his hand, the grime under them leaving dark marks. His other hand remained clasped around the circular, golden object he had pieced back together. The leather strap, looped through a small hold on the side of it, dangled down.

The boy watched the stranger, and got up himself. He reached forwards to offer some sort of support, but the man raised his hand in refusal.

"I'm alright," he coughed, then regained his composure. He took a deep breath, and turned to the boy. "As I said, I'm known by many names, some more flattering than others."

He walked forwards a couple of steps, and raised the gadget to the lava. The light caught its battered cover, and it glimmered. The boy squinted, a beam of light momentarily blinding him. The man carefully let the device drop from his grasp, and watched as it swung back and forth on its string. Gently, he raised it over the boy's head, and dropped it around his neck.

"But I'd like you to call me Clay." He grinned.

The boy dragged his gaze from the man's face, and down to the object placed around his neck. It was quite heavy, and the strap cut into him as it was weighed down. His transparent hands carefully cupped the round gadget, and he brought it up to his face for a closer inspection.

He stroked the rough ridges and bumps with his thumbs, and stared at the battered, grimy gold lid. A hand reached out in front of him, and Clay flipped it open. Inside, a mostly white, slightly cracked plaque covered the inner workings, and a beautifully intricate wind rose was drawn on in black ink. A small, needle-thin arrow span wildly in the middle. The boy gently poked it, trying to get it to stop.

"It's a compass," the man said. "I couldn't do anything about the glass though, that was beyond repair."

The boy continued to stare at the arrow, and its circular trajectory. It spun around and around, and never stopped. Sometimes, it moved clockwise. Sometimes, anti-clockwise. But it never pointed in the same direction for too long.

"It's a little confused," Clay admitted, reaching up and scratching the back of his neck. His hand lingered for longer than it should have. "I couldn't do anything about that either."

You still managed to fix it... the boy thought, in awe of the quick repair. He raised his head, and his eyes locked with the man's. After a couple of moments, he dipped his chin in a silent gesture of thanks.

To his delight, Clay understood, and gave him a nod back. "You're welcome," he replied, staring at the boy with a friendly gaze.

The boy's attention turned back to the compass. Snugly resting in his hands, the metal was warm, and his fingers grasped it tighter. There was something about it – perhaps it was the way it seemed to fit so perfectly in his hands – that comforted the boy, and his previous emotions died down. In their place, a sense of extreme calm took

hold of his body. It was almost as relaxing as the feeling of slumbering in the lava was, although nothing could seem to beat the soft curtains layering over his body.

All of a sudden, he froze as something grabbed his arm. It held him like an iron shackle, cold and clammy. He tried to squirm away.

"You're extremely pale..." Clay whispered, admiring his hand through the boy's transparent skin. His thumb gently stroked the crook of his arm, absent-mindedly. "I've never seen a ghost as see-through as you..."

The boy stopped struggling, and stared at the man. *Ghost?* What did he mean by ghost?

The panic in his eyes must have startled the man. He dropped the boy's arm. "I didn't mean to scare you."

The boy stared down at himself. His body shook, and the red spots began to border on the edge of his vision. He raised a hand to his face, and he gulped, staring at Clay's face through it.

Am I a ghost?

Chapter Thirteen: The Red Windmill

"Are you sure this is the right way?"

"Positive."

Puffy briefly glanced around them. Red, rocky walls stretched up beside them, surrounding the beaten track with steep, fiery slopes. Nothing looked familiar. That was probably fine, right?

"Are you certain?"

"Look," Puffy huffed, kicking the pebble-strewn floor beneath her feet, "we're following the path, aren't we?"

"We're getting further from the lake. I can't even see it anymore."

"We're following the path," the sheep repeated, confident. They continued down the bottom of the ravine. "I'm certain this is the right way."

"You've never even been here before!"

"I have a good sense of direction," she told him, ignoring his point.

Sam scoffed audibly behind her back. "Alright, *Captain*," he sighed. His tone was teasing, but still held a cautious undertone.

"Sam, lighten up!" Puffy turned around, smiling at him. "Even if we are lost, at least it's an adventure!"

"It will be until someone has to try and find our burned bodies, half devoured by a herd of hoglins."

The dusty path continued, slowly winding up a slope and exiting the chasm. Huffing and sweltering, the two of them followed it, secretly longing for the frozen air of Snowchester's northern landscape.

"I need to get back to the Vault," Sam suddenly blurted out, out of the blue. "I haven't checked up on it all day."

"Will you calm down with the prison?" Puffy exclaimed. She gestured around them. "Take a break!" She felt a cold, hard stare on her back, and quickly snuck a look behind her.

"Dream must *not* escape."

"You said the prison was inescapable. Impenetrable layers, redstone and all that jazz. Why are you so worried?"

"I am one of the impenetrable layers," Sam said sternly, frowning and slapping a hand to his chest. "I'm part of the security. Without me, everything else will crumble."

"Not in the next three days or so," the sheep reassured him, indulging his worry to the best of her abilities.

"You don't know that," the warden replied. "Pandora's Vault has already been attacked once." His tone faltered. "I can't risk another lockdown or break-in..."

The consequences of that single, explosive disturbance were tragic. They both knew that.

Sam's anxiety finally spread to Puffy, and she faltered. "I..." She cleared her throat. "Did you catch them?"

"Who?"

"Whoever set off the TNT. They couldn't have gone far after doing it."

Sam shook his head. "No," he said, bitter. "There was no sign of them."

"But getting on the prison's roof is hard enough, and to get down afterwards—"

"No sign of them," he interrupted. He quickened his pace as he spoke, overtaking her. "Everyone else has suggested the same theories and procedures to take. I've tried them all. I spent countless days and hours relentlessly questioning everyone in the area that day. No one saw anything."

"Well," The captain trotted up next to him, "maybe it was one of Dream's old allies?"

Sam scoffed. "What allies?" He faltered. "But I did think of that. So I went to question everyone I suspected, but nothing came of it."

"Which ended up being...?"

"Just Punz," he sighed. "He'd be the only one skilled enough to do something like that. Turns out, he was closing a business deal in Kinoko at the time, and both Sarnap and Karl could vouch for him."

"Maybe it was just an accident then?" the sheep suggested after a moment of thought. "A stray firework, or a stray creeper, or—"

"It wasn't."

"You... you sound so sure..."

"I *am* sure," Sam muttered. "I'm certain, even."

"You don't know—"

"Tommy was visiting Dream that day," the warden said. "It was supposed to be his last visit. His *last* visit, Puffy. *Someone* knew he was there. *Someone* caused the lockdown to trap him in there..." He trailed off, stopping in his tracks. Puffy halted next to him. "Someone was trying to kill him... and they succeeded."

"Sam," Captain Puffy held his arm, trying to calm him down, "you don't know that."

He was shaking, seething with anger. "There's no other explanation," he whispered hoarsely. "I'll find out who set off that explosion—" – a growl rumbled in his throat – "— and I'll kill them. I'll hunt them down and I'll beat them to death."

"Sam—"

"I will," he promised. "I'll do to them what they did to Tommy."

"It was Dream who—"

"I'll kill both of them, then." He dragged his fingers over the knuckles on one of his hands, lost in a daze. "I'll make them bleed."

Powerless, the sheep realized that there was no changing his mind. "Until then," she said, squeezing his arm, "just be the friendly and gentle guy I know you can be, alright? For me."

He looked at her, his murderous attitude falling immediately. "I'm sorry," he apologized. They set off again.

"It's fine," she forgave him. "You just need to take a small break from... all this, at least until we get to Snowchester."

They were almost at the top of the chasm by now. The landscape still bore no familiarities or landmarks they recognized, to their dismay. Their boots skid on the rough, rocky ground, almost tripping them up.

"Did I scare you?" Sam suddenly asked.

Puffy inhaled the stuffy, burning stench of the Nether. "A little," she coughed, ash filling her lungs.

Her eyes searched the land for any sign of civilisation. A brown, desert land stretched before them, speckled with spots of blue fire and oversized, pearly white skeletons. Nothing that reminded any of them of the Overworld.

She lingered on her next sentence, spying the continuation of the trail winding through the dunes. "Tommy's passing has changed you."

"My mistake has changed us all."

Suddenly, a piercing cry filled the air. The travellers froze in their tracks, startled. Puffy nervously glanced around them, while Sam drew out his sabre. The sharp, netherite blade glowed a shining metallic purple in the light of the blue fires. "Did you hear that?" he whispered, tightening his grip.

Puffy nodded, still scanning their surroundings. "I did," she murmured, her hand fumbling beside her belt. With a hiss, she drew out her silver cutlass from its scabbard, and held it tightly in front of her. "What was it?"

"It definitely wasn't a ghost," the warden replied after a minute, his green eyes alert to any sort of movement.

The cry pierced the air once more. They both perked up as they heard it, turning in the direction of the sound. The desert stretched further to their right, and dipped down beneath a rocky peak.

"That was..." Sam sounded a little confused. "It sounded like—"

"—a squeal," Puffy finished for him.

They quickly exchanged a look. Puffy knew they were both thinking the same thing. It was a squeal for help.

"What do we do?" the warden asked.

"Maybe we should go investigate," the captain suggested.

"We're armourless," he quickly reminded her.

"Even so." The captain took a step forward off the path. Her foot immediately sank into the brown sand, regaining her balance as it held her ankle firmly in place. "If there's any danger, we run."

"Have you ever tried running in a soul sand valley?"

She glanced back briefly. "You don't have to come, I can handle this on my own."

She was startled by the hand placing itself on her shoulder. "I'm not letting you go alone," her friend told her, serious. "We'll see what it was, and if we can do something, we will. If not—"

"If not, we leave," the sheep agreed with a nod. They exchanged a small look of reassurance, and set off, away from the path this time.

The brown soul sand tugged at their feet, threatening to pull them down into the depths and swallow them whole. The warm breeze that whipped around them and the crackling fires seemed to hold the voices of a thousand spirits – in fact, every single noise in the valley did, an orchestra of whispers and hushed screams they could barely hear. The dusty, dark ground wasn't named after the souls of the dead for nothing. Every step they took left behind a deep footprint that was soon filled by the crumbling sand. They struggled up the dunes, their legs aching from the ascent. Puffy's calves were on fire. When they got to the rocky peak, they slid down the sand on the other side, weapons still drawn and held firmly in their hands.

All of a sudden, Sam pushed Puffy behind the jutting rib of a massive, fossilized skeleton partially submerged in the sand. The sheep's back pressed against the bone, and she held her breath. In front of her, her friend pressed himself against her and cast furtive looks around them. She tried to wriggle away, only for his body to keep her firmly in place.

"If this is your attempt at some sort of seduction, I think we need to have a good, long talk," she muttered, close to kicking him in the gut.

Silently, Sam pressed a finger to his lips and shook his head.

"What?" she mouthed.

He gestured to a small spot in the distance. The captain peered out from behind the rib cage, cautiously following his gaze.

The desert continued to stretch out, shrouded in ash-filled clouds. More large bones and skeletons littered the floor creating a vast, macabre cemetery of silent creatures long extinct. Blue flames licked the sides of these creature's remains, charring the white bones until they crumbled into dust.

Sam's warm breath on her ear made her jump. "Look at the skull."

Puffy didn't have to search for long. Only one skull took pride of place in the middle of the graveyard. Lying on its side, it looked like it belonged to some sort of dragon, or another large, reptilian creature. Its jaw was unhinged, displaying razor sharp teeth to the bright fires of the desert. In the shadows of the empty eye sockets, something moved. The desperate squeal was heard again, this time followed by low, threatening grunts and loud, thundering footsteps.

Puffy's blood froze as she recognized the noises. "Piglins," she breathed, anxious.

Sam nodded. "I still can't tell what the other sound is," he muttered.

The sheep felt a sense of dread rush through her. "We should get closer," she suggested.

Next to her, the warden spluttered, "What? Are you crazy?!"

"Someone could be in danger!"

"We can't risk having to fight any piglins! Tensions are strained enough already as they are."

"I never said we would have to fight them," Puffy huffed. She shoved her friend off her, and quietly began to make her way over to the skull.

Her footsteps were muffled by the soft sand, and her light weight allowed her to sneak up to the skull undetected. When she got to her destination, she crouched down, keeping low to the ground.

"You're damn lucky that the air is so unbreathable," Sam muttered, joining her reluctantly a moment later, "or we'd be found in no time."

"Shush!" she hissed.

The squealing wasn't as loud now, but whatever it was still let out high-pitched breathy whimpers. Something about it struck a chord with her. She didn't know why, but she *had* to know who or what was making those sounds. Gingerly, the sheep started to get up—

"What do you think you're doing?!" Sam hissed, yanking her back down in fear.

"I'm trying to see."

"You're going to get your head chopped off!"

"I will if you give the game away," she spat back, shrugging off his hold yet again.

The warden sank down against the hard bone, holding his head in his hands and muttering something under his breath. "You're insane," he said, a little louder.

The captain ignored him, and rose up again. Peering over the edge of the eye socket, still making sure to keep her head somewhat hidden, she watched the scene unfold, searching for the source of the higher pitched cries. Eventually, she found it, and held her breath. Her heart stopped, and her body froze.

"Puffy?" Sam shook her leg. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She didn't say anything. She *couldn't* say anything.

In the ghostly blue light of the valley, the skull was shrouded in shadows. Around the opening, a horde of brutish, heavily built piglins moved forwards, gleeful grunts and groans echoing around the bone chamber. Their crudely crafted weapons were drawn, their sharp tusks glinted ominously, and their few pieces of armour and leather clothing strained against their bulking bodies.

Puffy followed the battalion's collective gaze further back into the skull. Cowering against the bone cage, a small creature, barely taller than a toddler, let out grunts and squeals akin desperate pleas, throwing herself against the skull and trying to scabble out. Her small trotters slipped against the polished, white surface, and she slid back down to the bottom again.

The creature was recognizably a piglin, albeit much smaller and a lot more damaged, clothed simply with a crudely sewn amalgamation of ragged leather cloths. Her pale pink fur was flaking in some areas, revealing dry bone beneath, and one of her eyes was missing from its socket. In between her visible rib cage, Puffy could see a glimpse of her small heart pound faster and faster, and her slightly damaged jaw hung open in silent horror. The small zombie piglin turned around, staring at the advancing horde, her eye wide with fear. Her loud, desperate squeals soon turned into strained whimpers. Her breathing came out in short, terrified puffs.

"It's..." Puffy trailed off. A small sob caught in her throat, making her choke. She swallowed hard. "We need to help."

"What is it?" Sam repeated. He shook her again. "Answer me!"

Puffy's body seemed to heat up, even more so than from the sweltering climate of the Nether. A strange force ran through her veins. She felt as if she could fight a thousand warriors and lift a hundred mountains. It was something that could start and end wars. The way the small creature cowered in fear awoke something in her.

"Puffy! What are you doing?" the warden whispered frantically. Subconsciously, she had grabbed a hand-sized, shining turquoise ball. "Don't—" He reached out to stop her, his fingers barely brushing her arm.

Puffy took no notice of his pleas and threw the enderpearl through the skull. There was a sudden flash of violet light, and she found herself facing the horde of piglins, face twisted into a snarl. The purple particles that floated around her began to fade as she spoke.

"Leave," she ordered. She took a protective stance in front of the little one in distress.

The piglins, at first startled by the apparition, soon detected a threat, and let out grunts of defiance. A string was slowly pulled back with a creak as a crossbow was loaded, and golden swords swung dangerously close to her.

Puffy raised her cutlass. "I said, leave," she repeated.

The piglins continued to advance, menacing. The baby piglin squealed in fright, and curled up on herself.

A strike of silver suddenly cut across the nearest piglin's face, and he reeled back, yelping in agony. A deep, long gnash stretched across his face and snout, oozing dark brown blood. The attackers halted for a hot second. Captain Puffy kept her sword high, ready for another swing.

The injured creature pressed a large, grimy hand to his face, then glared daggers at the culprit. He grunted long and hard, his damaged tusks soaked with his blood. His companion with the loaded crossbow shuffled to the front of the herd, pointing it out over his comrades' shoulders. More golden swords were unsheathed. Trotters pawed the sandy floor. Heavy bulks of battle scarred flesh brushed against each other. They advanced, aggressive. Each piglin was impatient to sink their yellowing, sharp teeth into the intruder and gore her to death with their tusks. They were ready to rip her apart.

The captain held her breath, realizing her mistake. She took a step back, still maintaining her protective stance over the baby piglin. Her hand was clammy, and she shuddered at the thought of possibly having to fight the entire battalion on her own.

All of a sudden, a figure appeared in front of her in another explosion of purple particles. A green cape billowed out, momentarily blocking Puffy's vision. The sharp clink of a flint and steel reached her ears, and the piglins squealed in terror as a wall of blue flames rose in front of them. The fire spat, licking their armour and weapons, and forced them backwards. A distance soon formed between both sides. The flames died down a moment later, smouldering at the newcomer's feet.

"You better have a *very* good reason to risk your neck like this," Sam hissed, craning his neck backwards.

Captain Puffy quickly leapt to his side, but before she could answer, he locked his eyes on the horde again. With the wall no longer as threatening as before, they had advanced again.

Sam used the flint and steel again, creating another wall of protection. Sparks flew, igniting everything they touched. The warden then drew out his sword again, and flicked some of the flaming sand into the nearest piglin's eyes. The creature let out a cry. He dropped his weapon, and tried to get rid of the blue flames scorching him.

The rest of the battalion shared worried looks with one another. A particularly beefy piglin, possibly the leader of the group, twitched his ears, and grunted. A few of the others let out snorts and groans of protest, only to be silenced by an aggressive shove. With a sharp gesture, their leader ordered a retreat, and the others reluctantly followed. The horde scrambled to get away, trotters slipping on the sandy dunes and accidentally kicking their partners in the process.

One of the brutes looked back at their attackers, his open wound and blood starting to dry and fester. He caught Puffy's gaze, and growled. One of his other companions turned back as well, and fired a single shot from his crossbow. The arrow narrowly missed impaling Sam between his eyes, and instead hit the bone of the skull behind him. The two piglins then caught up with the rest, and soon enough, the battalion disappeared behind a sand dune. Puffy realized that she had been holding her breath all this time, and finally allowed herself to breathe freely. She closed her eyes, trying to regain her composure and calm her nerves, re-sheathing her cutlass in the process. When she opened them, she found herself staring straight into Sam's black and green eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asked her, his face twisted with worry. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, quickly reassuring him. "I'm completely fine," she replied with a small smile.

"Thanks the gods..." The warden then crossed his arms, his worried look soon fading to suspicion and anger. "Then I hope your reasoning behind you throwing yourself into that situation is *phenomenally* good."

The sheep quickly remembered, and turned around. "It is," she replied softly, crouching down. She held out her hand.

No longer fearing the horde out to murder her, the small zombie piglin now had her gaze trained on her saviours with just as much terror as before. She tried to retreat further backwards, her trotters slipping on the bone and her back pressed against the skull's wall. She whimpered.

Puffy smiled reassuringly, and shuffled forwards. "We're not going to hurt you," she cooed.

Her ears cocked backwards as she heard her friend let out a cry of disbelief. "You've got to be kidding me..." he groaned. "*That* was what was so important?"

"Shut up," Puffy ordered, casting him a warning glare. She turned her attention back to the cowering creature. "Are you alright?"

The zombie piglin crossed the sheep's warm, loving gaze, and tilted her head ever so slightly. The captain moved even closer, until her fingers were a few inches away from the little one's snout. The piglin sniffed them, still incredibly cautious, before gingerly pressing her nose against the friendly hand. Puffy's heart swelled as the soft, wet nose made contact, and she extended her other hand to stroke the matted, flaking fur.

"Why would anyone want to hurt such a sweetheart?" she wondered out loud, feeling the small creature shiver beneath her touch.

"I'll tell you why," Sam suddenly piped up, to the captain's dismay. "The piglins see their zombified dead as a threat. That horde was probably ordered to hunt and kill any on sight, and now we've made them our enemies—"

"Where are your parents?" she interrupted, ignoring the warden's musings. The little piglin stayed silent, but had since grown more confident with Puffy's advances. She was now clinging on to her forearm like a lifebelt.

"Probably part of the hunting party set to kill her, if I had to take a guess."

"*Sam!*"

"What?"

"Why are you like this?"

"I'm being realistic," he corrected her gruffly. "We've angered a whole battalion. Nothing good will come of that."

"Then we need to get out of the Nether as soon as we can," the sheep hummed, pulling the zombie piglin into her arms. The little critter didn't resist, and instead started grabbing and pulling at the brown and white curls she could reach. Puffy's gaze lingered on her little protégée, her heart swelling, and she turned to her companion.

He raised an eyebrow. "With the piglin?"

"With the piglin. You said it yourself, she isn't safe here."

"Will she be any safer in the Overworld?" the warden asked.

Amused, Puffy realized that he was desperately trying to avoid getting distracted by the little figure curled up in his friend's arms. His eyes tried focusing on her, only to be pulled down again when the baby piglin grunted, or turned her large, sparkling eye up to him. He quickly tried to drag his eyes away at every given opportunity.

"Things aren't necessarily better there for her either," he continued.

Puffy briefly let her smile fall, and paused. She hated to admit it, but he was right. Nether creatures weren't made for the Overworld conditions, and bringing a small tyke like this one there would be a dangerous mission.

Thankfully, Sam gave her an idea soon after.

"If you insist on bringing her out of the Nether, I know what we can do."

"What?"

"We pretend she's Micheal, and stealthily replace him with her. Then, we'll see if Tubbo and Ranboo really know the difference between their zombie piglin and any other one."

"Sam!" the captain spluttered, unsure if he was joking or not. "You're a sick man! Sick!"

Nevertheless, in the midst of his macabre chuckles, his suggestion had given her an idea. Heaving the zombie piglin up into a more comfortable position, she turned to him.

"We follow the path again," she told him, "and we get to Snowchester."

"Wait, you're actually agreeing to my plan?" Sam's eyes widened.

Puffy narrowed her eyes. "Of course not!" she tutted. Trying to keep her balance with the added weight in her arms, she started trudging through the soul sand desert. "But you *have* given me an idea of who could look after her..."

Captain Puffy ended up being right: the path they had followed was the correct one, albeit long and winding. Soon enough, they had found the Nether portal they had been looking for, and had left the fiery hell scape with the small piglin they had saved. In stark contrast to the Nether, the part of Overworld they had exited into was a relief. At least, it was until the bitter cold really started to get to them.

Snowchester was a fairly new addition to the roster of nations around the Greater SMP.

Nation wouldn't be the right term for it; it had been stated many times that it was a "commune". Never a real nation. Never again, or so it seemed from the outside. Built upon a taiga forest in the north-west, it stretched down the snowy hills to the banks of a large, frozen sea, and was surrounded by stone ramparts and watchtowers. It was an isolated colony, with only its port and the Nether portal to connect it to the other factions.

Spruce and stone cabins lined the cobbled streets that zigzagged down to the frozen harbour and potato fields set up on the banks. Slanted roofs and tree branches were weighed down with crisp white snow, as were the pavements and the fence posts. Inhabitants were wrapped up warmly in thick fleeces and leather clothes, with tartan scarfs wound around their necks, slowly making their way to their destinations

through the bitter cold. Golden lanterns glowed warmly on top of street lamps and over doorways, matching the cosy firelight pouring out of the windows and shining on the wet cobbles. Wisps of warm smoke escaped the stone chimneys, curling up into the pastel coloured sky.

Late evening was upon them by the time they had left the Nether, and the snow was shadowed by pink and purple light. Puffy and Sam made their way up a wooden staircase beside the harbour wet with sleet, firmly planting each foot before taking another step. A big house rose before them, bright light filtering out from the cracks in the partially closed shutters.

The warden cast a look around them, and up at the sky. Small snowflakes began to fall from the clouds overhead, gently drifting down. The zombie piglin in his arms sneezed as one fell onto her snout, and she tried to brush it away. Immediately, she recoiled, a sharp sizzling sound reaching his ears. With a pained whimper, the piglin retreated around Sam's neck, clinging onto him with her small trotters. The sweltering heat from her body was a blessing in the frozen landscape, but the small flake and the wet trail it had left when brushed away had left a thin, dark scar on her muzzle. Sam wasted no time in sheltering the creature with his cloak, protecting her from the oncoming snowfall. He shivered as the northern wind whipped his back like a leather lash, but he soon found comfort in the baby piglin's body heat.

He turned to Puffy, who was trying to peer in through the windows of the cabin. "Are you sure about this?" he asked her, slightly sceptical.

The sheep lingered a little, her eye peering through a crack. "There's a fire roaring," she told him, stepping back. "I'm pretty sure someone's in there."

"Can we not just leave her on the doorstep?" Sam suggested, soon realizing it was a terrible, monstrous idea.

"Of course we can't, she'll catch her death out here." Puffy paused, glancing at the zombie piglin. "I mean... Can they still die? She's an undead one, right?"

"I think they still can, but I don't think either of us want to test the theory."

The captain strode over to the door, and prepared to knock. Her hand paused just as she was about to bring it down on the wood.

Sam and the piglin watched her, waiting. "Puffy?"

"Yes?"

"Should we really do this?"

He could sense her own hesitation, as she too looked ready to backtrack.

The sheep lowered her fist, and looked back at him. "It's the best option for the young one," she said with a fake sense of confidence. "Tubbo will know how to take care of her, and Michael will get a new friend."

"I just..." The warden trailed off, sensing a dark feeling pool in his stomach. "Should we really talk to *him*?"

It was a rhetorical question, and he knew it. He knew that his friend was thinking the same thing, and he knew that's why she had hesitated.

Puffy's next sentence soon confirmed his suspicions. "He didn't come to the funeral," she whispered. "I haven't spoken to him in... a week..."

In a moment of grief-stricken guilt, Sam whispered back to her, "I don't want to confront him."

For a while, he had managed to keep his emotions and darkened thoughts in check, but the mere mention of the burial brought them back like a tidal wave of pain.

Puffy looked away. "Neither do I..." She took a deep breath, and held her head high. "But this isn't about us," she said, boldly stepping towards the front door again. "This is about a young child who needs to be looked after and cared for."

The baby zombie piglin shifted a little against Sam, starting to doze off in his arms and the folds of his green cloak. The man couldn't help but smile at the scene. Perhaps he didn't like to admit it, but the journey as the little creature's pack mule for the past couple of hours had made him attached to her. He even stopped making the same "replacing Michael" joke after about thirty minutes or so.

"You're right," he agreed, his tone soft. "We can't keep running from this. Knock. And if the funeral is brought up, change the subject. I think we all want to avoid talking about it..."

"Avoid the subject," Puffy nodded. "Got it."

She rapped her fist against the wood in three, quick knocks. The lantern above the door swayed lightly. The captain stepped back and tucked the cape closer around the little one in Sam's arms.

"She's a sweetheart," she murmured.

The loving, motherly gaze Puffy had in her eyes didn't escape Sam, and neither did the tender way she fussed over the baby piglin like a mother hen. He couldn't help but smile at her dedication, only for it to falter a moment later as the memory of what he himself had lost came back to him.

"Sam? Sam!"

He snapped back to attention at the calling of his name. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I just zoned out for a bit..."

"It's alright," his friend replied. She rubbed his arm. "I know."

Suddenly, the door in front of them opened with a creak, making them both jump. The bright indoor lights shone through the threshold and framed a tall, lanky figure. He cast a large shadow over the doorstep, the shadow of an otherworldly figure. Sam was pleasantly surprised. It wasn't someone they expected to see, but perhaps talking to him would be easier than confronting Tubbo himself.

"Ranboo!" Puffy sighed in relief. "We didn't expect to see you here!"

At such a late time of the day, it was odd to see him linger in Snowchester. Of course, it was his choice, and his life, and perhaps Tubbo simply needed the company. She peered behind him, into the lodge. Sam did the same. He couldn't see much, except a roaring fire and a wooden table laden with warm food.

"The feeling is mutual." The hybrid quickly ducked under the threshold, blocking their view, and closed the door behind him. His eyes were narrowed, far from friendly or welcoming. "What are you doing here?"

The sheep took a step back at his harsh tone. "We... uh..."

Sam came to her rescue. "We have something to ask you."

"What do you want?"

The warden was shocked at the strange change in the normally anxious, jumpy young hybrid. His nervous personality had been replaced by a demeanour colder than the wintery commune around them, did not fit him in the slightest. It was strange, and unnerving. Sam moved closer to him, and looked up. While Ranboo normally slouched, the perfectly straight posture he now adopted made him a good head or so taller than the warden, and he stared down at him with his reptilian eyes. It took a while to get used to.

Sam couldn't tell if Ranboo's tone was impatient, bored, or uninterested. He knew however that it wasn't a positive start to their interaction.

"Well..." he began, head high. He wouldn't be intimidated, that was for sure. "How's Michael?"

Ranboo stared him down suspiciously. "He's fine," he replied, "and would be a lot better if you left."

Sam glanced over at Puffy. "Why is that?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"He just would."

"Ranboo," Puffy bleated, butting into the conversation. Unlike Sam, she seemed to be trying to get to the point as quickly as possible. "We were travelling through the Nether today, and, well..."

She gently drew back the cloak, revealing the zombie piglin snuggled against the warden's neck. She had since dozed off completely, nice and warm in Sam's arms. He allowed himself a small, discreet smile at her blissfulness.

The enderman hybrid, on the other hand, took one, brief look at the sleeping creature, and immediately turned away. "Leave," he ordered, opening the door a crack.

"Hold on there!" Puffy stopped him, stepping into his path. "What do you mean, 'leave'?"

"What else could it mean?" One of his pointed ears twitched.

Puffy let out a string of strangled sounds, before she answered. "We saved her!" she cried. "She could have been killed!"

"Congratulations."

"Ranboo, listen to me!" She grabbed his arm. Her voice was almost desperate. "You and Tubbo have done a wonderful job at taking care of Michael, and now another young one needs that."

"Not my problem," the hybrid said dryly, shaking her off.

"So you'd leave a child to die?"

"No." He paused, and faced them both. His eyes bore into Sam's, knowingly. "But *you* might."

Everyone fell silent. Puffy's face changed from anxiety and desperation to sudden shock, her mouth open, speechless. Ranboo's face stayed as it was, passive and indecipherable. They knew what the hybrid had said. They knew how serious it was.

Sam's chest tightened, and the small creature clinging onto him suddenly weighed tons. He closed his eyes, and took a small but deep breath. "By *you*", you mean me," he managed to push out, "don't you?"

Ranboo didn't give him a direct reply. "We've spoken about this, Sam," he reminded him.

"You have?" Puffy was glancing from one to the other, before she approached Sam.

"Yes, we have," the warden replied. "A few days before the funeral."

"We said we were to avoid the topic," she hissed to him. She was promptly ignored.

The warden struggled to stay calm and collected, "I'm not denying anything, Ranboo, and you know that. Everything that happened in there was my fault, and my fault only."

He felt Puffy tug at his sleeve, a silent urge to either back off, or to try and comfort him with words of denial.

Ranboo didn't say anything, blinking slowly.

"But this isn't about Tommy," Sam continued, circling back to his and Puffy's initial question. "This is about a piglin."

The Nether creature in question shifted against him almost on cue, tickling his skin with piping hot breath.

"Michael could have a friend, and we know that he's treated well."

"I can't risk anything happening to Michael," Ranboo replied.

"She's a kid, and so is he! What danger is there?"

"I don't want to talk about this," Ranboo cut him off.

"What are you so scared of?" Sam probed.

"I don't want to take any chances."

"She's a *child*! It's for the greater good."

"You would know a lot about not taking risks for the greater good."

"That's enough, both of you!" Puffy bleated sharply, stepping between them.

Ranboo eyed the warden. "My decision is final," he told them coldly, "and the answer is no."

"What's wrong with you, Ranboo?" Sam shook his head in disbelief. His tone went from annoyed to worried. "Are you alright?"

"Just leave," the hybrid repeated, with no emotion whatsoever.

Captain Puffy stepped in, once again. "It's fine," she said to the hybrid, shoving Sam towards the stairs. "We will."

Ranboo said nothing, and disappeared inside the lodge. The door closed with a sharp bang, and the lantern overhead swung precariously on its hook. The noise was loud enough to startle the little piglin, who opened her eyes in a panic, and perked up. Puffy immediately rushed to her side to soothe her.

Sam turned his head up to the darkening sky above them, just as the wind picked up. Tumultuous swirls of white snow soared through the air, carried by the strong breeze. In the harbour below, the sails on the boats were being brought down and tied up, before the sailors themselves rushed to seek shelter.

"A snowstorm is coming," he muttered.

Puffy nodded in agreement. "We should definitely leave." It seemed like even nature itself was trying to chase them away. Gently, she lifted the piglin out of the warden's arms, and she held her against her chest. Sam admired the tenderness with which she did so, and smiled.

Her eyes darted towards him, glimmering in the twilight. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, and she smiled brightly. "What is it?" she asked him.

He diverted his gaze and chuckled lightly, readjusting his cloak. "Nothing."

The two of them swiftly made their way down the stairs, and back onto the streets. The storm had really started to settle in now, the wind blowing with more and more gusto by every second, and they quickened their pace. Once or twice, the warden looked back towards the harbour. Ranboo was still standing at the window of Tubbo's cabin, watching them carefully. Sam turned away, uneasy.

Before long, the cobbled street ended, and was replaced by a track leading up a small hill. They followed it up a bit, until they came to another house. While it still resembled the majority of the Snowchester's structures, this one had the addition of a stout wooden tower topped with a windmill. The large canvas wings turned lazily and aimlessly in circles, the setting sun casting dark red shadows on them. The frost on the canvas seemed to glow a light crimson, as if a million burning stars and fires had been woven into them, glittering in the evening light.

For a moment, they both stood there, under the cover of the sails. The snow was falling a little heavier now, weighing down the roof. A couple of larger flakes drifted down and, curious, the baby piglin reached out to grab them.

"Do you know why I smiled?" Sam asked his friend suddenly.

The windmill creaked above them, still turning. The shadows turned even redder as the sun began to disappear behind Snowchester's ramparts.

Puffy turned to him, her new protégée bundled up in her arms. "No, why?"

Sam let his gaze wander upwards. "Because I realize you're the only decent person left here," he said, perhaps a little bitter.

The sheep shook her head. "That's not true and you know it."

"You are," he pressed, glancing at her and the young one. "She'll be safe with you. You'll be a good parent. You always were."

"I knew someone like that once," she murmured. She heaved the piglin into a more comfortable position, and sighed as she snuggled into her neck.

Sam shifted uncomfortably. "Did you?" he asked, his voice strained. "How interesting..."

"A strange man," she continued. "Mysterious, perhaps a little distant at first, but a loving one. He cared for a boy who had been through way too much, and he helped him. He helped him in every way. He was like a father to him."

The warden exhaled sharply. "Puffy—"

"One day, the boy died. The man blamed himself, but it wasn't his fault. He couldn't see that."

"Please stop."

Sam couldn't take it any more. He screwed his eyes shut, and hoped the wind would carry away the words of reassurance he didn't deserve.

"I'm telling the truth."

"I didn't save the piglin today," he muttered. "If it wasn't for you risking your life, I would have probably left her for dead..."

"But you *didn't* leave her, and she loves you now."

One look from the little one's shining eye was both painful and heart-warming, and Sam tried to chase the conflicting feelings away. "You'll be a good mother to her," he said.

"Oi!" Puffy exclaimed, teasing. "You're not going to leave me on my own here, are you?"

"I've failed with Tommy." *And Ranboo*, he added silently as the strange hostility the hybrid had shown began to sink in. "I'm not going to destroy another child's life."

"No one can fault you for loving someone." Her words resonated within him, but he wished they hadn't. They were too painful.

"Love isn't everything," he said through gritted teeth. "It makes us act like fools. You need a good head on your shoulders. You need logic. An open heart is not everything."

"Yet you have both."

"And look what happened."

"You made sure he didn't go through his problems alone," she said, "you were there when others weren't."

"Except when he needed me the most."

The image of Tommy's battered and bruised body would never leave him alone. Ever.

Captain Puffy didn't answer that particular remark. Either it was because she didn't know how to, or she knew that the warden was too stubborn to listen.

"You cared for him," she said, "we both did."

"It wasn't enough to save him."

The harsh weather had since died down, replaced by a quiet, soft snowfall. The howling wind was no more. The red windmill continued to creak above them, the sparkling frost slowly dying out into a deeper shade of red. The first evening star twinkled in the sky, and all around Snowchester, shutters banged shut. Large bonfires were lit on the watchtowers, and the first night patrol took their places on the parapets around the commune.

"There was nothing you could have done, Sam, and there's nothing you can do now."

Sam bit his lip, lost in thought. There *was* something he could do, perhaps... maybe. He just still needed to somehow come to terms with the idea itself, and with the thought of ever trusting Dream again. That journey alone was bound to be a long and painful one. Yet, something stopped him from telling Puffy, unwilling to cause someone else even more pain than he already had – especially when it came to her.

"Sam, did you hear me? You're not to blame for any of this. The only thing you're guilty of is wanting to protect and care for us all."

"If I had to lose one thing," Sam replied, "it would be my ability to love."

"What?" Puffy gasped, taken aback.

He didn't dare cross her gaze. "It hurts too much," he confessed. "I love the feeling, but I hate the way it ends. All the grief and agony."

"That's what happens..." Puffy trailed off. "That's how it goes, I guess."

"Then I don't want it."

Sam blinked slowly as the eerie shadows of the night took over the landscape. The cosy homes and streets were soon swallowed by black. The red windmill continued to turn, but the red colour faded to a dark, dismal grey.

"Do you want to come in?" Puffy asked, heading up the steps to her front door. She still seemed a little shaken.

Her home was dark and cold, but would certainly be alive and comfortable in a few minutes. A warm, nice place to stay the night, in a peaceful nation away from all the troubles and problems of the world outside the ramparts.

"No thanks," Sam declined politely. "I better get going." The baby piglin was fast asleep in his companion's arms, snoring softly. He repressed the warm feeling within him. "Take good care of her, alright?"

"Promise me you'll come and visit," the captain pleaded. "Michelle really loves you."

"Michelle?"

The sheep smiled softly, gazing at the little one. "I thought it was a fitting name," she shrugged.

Michelle.

It fit nice and snugly, like a warm glove.

"I'll try to come," he promised. "Goodnight, Puffy."

His friend walked back towards him and gave him one last peck to his cheek. It was warm, and a blessing in the frozen night.

"Goodnight, Sam," Puffy whispered, brushing a couple of snowflakes off his shoulder. "Stay safe."

"You too."

And he meant it. If anything happened to Puffy – one of, if not *the* only one he felt he could still trust – he didn't know what he'd do. He wouldn't be able to take it. He failed everyone he loved up till then. He would *not* fail her.

Chapter Fourteen: Feeling Lucky

"We're here."

Fundy's eyes snapped open, and he blinked a couple of times to gather his bearings. The gentle chugging of the steam train had stopped long ago, and the carriage they were in was no longer moving. He sat up straight, stretching out his aching legs. His tail gently brushed the soft leather bench he had been sleeping on, clearing away the remains of the chicken dinner he had dined on. His jaw unhinged as he let out a loud yawn, and he focused his gaze on the figure sitting opposite him.

Quackity grinned back. "Sleep well?" he asked.

"I guess." He peered through the grimy window. The fox yawned again. The evening shadows had begun to settle in the unstable-looking, shack-like station outside.

"That's good," Quackity nodded. He stood up from his seat, and dusted himself down after the long journey. He offered his hand to his friend. The fox turned his muzzle up and declined, before following Quackity out of the compartment.

As he walked down the narrow hallway, Fundy found himself darting furtive looks around him. He hadn't truly taken in the dilapidated state of the steam train when they had boarded, and the chicken he had consumed churned in his stomach. It was a miracle that they had made it all this way without the carriage falling to pieces.

The train was a rickety old machine, and not necessarily well looked after. All the windows, inside and out, were dirty and hard to see through, the carpets on the floor were fraying and moth-eaten. The walls were cracked, and peeling paint flaked onto the

floor underneath. Sparking, dusty lamps with cracked redstone bulbs hung and swung haphazardly along the curved ceiling. The insides of the compartments stunk of sweat and must, and another strange odour floated around the whole of the train. Even Fundy with his advanced sense of smell couldn't figure out what it was – not that he particularly wanted to. He scrunched his nose up in disgust and flattened his ears.

Quackity must have sensed his anxiousness, as he briefly turned his head back to him. "We're working on getting it fixed up," he assured him, "but so many people come here, and we don't have the time to. The train is constantly used! It's a bit outdated now, though. The norm seems to be Nether portals now. We should honestly think about branching out to dimension travel."

"Come where?" Fundy questioned.

He still had no idea where they were, or why. Quackity had dragged him off to who knows where, shoved him into a dangerous mode of transportation, and all for what? The occasional knowing and crooked smile, and nothing more.

Big Q turned the corner, and stopped at the train door. Just before he stepped out onto the platform, he adjusted his silk neck-tie and his jacket. "You'll see," he hummed, and disappeared in a puff of steam.

The fox followed behind with much less decorum and care. He unceremoniously shoved his cap back on his head, and pulled his coat closer around him.

The train whistled, and puffs of white smog layered the station. The cold was slight but bitter, and small snowflakes twirled around them. Fundy had a hard time keeping up with his friend, and had to dart between figures that seemed to appear out of nowhere, spectres emerging from the afterlife to haunt the shambled rails. He hadn't noticed how many people were riding with them, and before he knew it, the smokey platform was crawling with silhouettes. He kept dodging them, and unfortunately ended up knocking a couple on the shoulder. He kept his gaze trained on Quackity's slim figure a few meters in front of him. He kept going. Suddenly, Big Q stopped, and Fundy almost crashed into him.

"Alright," the fox demanded. The sheer amount of people had startled and disoriented him, and he wanted an explanation. "Why are we here? Who are all these people? What's this about? Where even are we?"

Questions gushed out of him like a torrent, and he barely drew in a breath.

"Fundy, Fundy..." Big Q tutted, placing a hand on his shoulder. The smog began to clear, and the setting sun's rays reached them once again. His golden tooth caught the light, and glimmered. "Calm down."

"Where are we?" the fox demanded to know, his eyes narrowed.

Draping an arm around his shoulders, Quackity guided Fundy forwards. "Fundy," he announced loudly, "welcome to Las Nevadas."

Despite the sunlight burning his senses, Fundy's eyes were transfixed by the landscape in front of him. He let his jaw hang in awe. From the station, a paved road stretched out, winding down to a vast expanse of land surrounded by snow capped mountains and a wild landscape. The path twisted and turned down the rocky slope, right until it hit the flat ground and the dazzling speck of civilization nursed in the crook of the valley.

The buildings were tall and rectangular, and constructed parallel to each other. The road continued through them, up to the biggest of them all that shone a bright white in the fading sun. They were orderly, sure, but far from mundane and unexciting. Their walls and corner were decorated by tall, ornate pillars, and lights of different shades shone brightly in synchronized patterns. Partially shadowed by the clouds of light snow, Las Nevadas glimmered like a mystical wonderland.

"Las Nevadas..." Fundy mumbled under his breath. He let the name roll off his tongue.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Quackity smirked, puffing out his chest. He clasped his hands behind his back.

Fundy although mesmerized, was still as puzzled as ever. "Why are we here?" he muttered.

"I just thought you'd like to see where I've been these past few months."

"You were gone?"

"Not very present," his friend corrected. "This is what I wanted to show you."

"Well, you've done that," Fundy pointed out in a huff, quietly cursing the long journey he took for apparently no reason.

Quackity must have caught on to his attitude, and burst out laughing. "You think I dragged you all the way out here for nothing, don't you?"

"I mean, it looks like a nice place," the other admitted truthfully. "But I could have done other things back home if I knew the journey was just to sightsee..."

"Other things, like moping around on the edge of a cliff?"

Fundy said nothing.

"Of course I didn't bring you here to just watch!" He laughed loudly, giving him a hearty pat on the back. He dragged him onto the paved road. "Come on!"

The fox was shoved between the crowd, and forced to follow the flow down into the valley. He hadn't taken the time to fully focus on all the other people but did now he was crammed in between them and travelling in the same direction. Faces full of joy and wonder formed a sea all around him, and whispers of furtive excitement whistled through the air.

"Can you believe it?" someone whispered, giddy, from somewhere behind the fox. "We're finally here!"

"I know," someone else replied, their tone obnoxiously high. "It's much bigger than I expected!"

Fundy was tempted to turn around and snap at them, or demand information, but his bitterness saw to it that he didn't. He was heading to the same place as them, so he would get his answers soon enough. Or at least, he hoped he would.

The crowd continued to move in unison, and the ornate buildings got bigger and bigger. Fundy had no idea where most of these people had travelled from, but some looked dishevelled and extremely sleep-deprived. The lingering smell of sweat and travelling animals filled the air as some brought along their horses, oxen and llama caravans down the road. They surrounded the walkers, the owners trying ever so hard to control their beasts all while attempting to calm their own jittery, ecstatic nerves. As he looked around him, he finally began to pick up a few details in the crowd. The travellers with the sun-kissed skin and sandy-coloured clothes most likely came from the desert lands, the Temple. On the other side, bright robes made of pure silk and speckled with small, glowing mushrooms were worn by visitors quite possibly hailing from Kinoko. There were a few people here and there that Fundy thought he recognized, and from

the way they caught his stare and looked away, mumbling to their companions, they had recognized him as well.

The fox turned the collar of his coat up, and kept his head low as mutters of bitter betrayal and curiosity reached his pointed ears. He didn't think he would have to face the old citizens of L'Manberg, least of all in the middle of a crowd where he couldn't escape them.

Quackity seemed to be having a better time than him, a few travellers recognizing him also but calling out with bright smiles and compliments. He was basking in his celebrity, offering kind words back and greetings of his own. That didn't sit right with Fundy for a couple of reasons. The first was that even the people of L'Manberg were warm and joyous towards Big Q. Had they forgotten that Quackity was as much to blame for Technoblade's attacks on their nation as Tommy or The Blade himself were?

"Fundy!" Quackity suddenly yelled above the crowd, destroying Fundy's attempts at remaining unrecognized by the very few who hadn't. A few people turned as the fox elbowed his way through them, and went to join his friend. Almost like a caring brother, Quackity draped a protective arm around him. "It's a big place," he warned. "I don't want you getting lost."

"I can manage by myself, you know," the fox muttered back, glancing around him. "I'm not a kid any more... "

Quackity smirked, his scar stretching. "Of course you aren't," he teased, taking off his friend's hat and ruffling the fur on top of his head.

The fox let out a breathy hiss of fury, and swiped at Big Q. He yapped. He snatched his hat back, and pulled it over his ears. The painful memory of his father came back to him. He didn't want it to, but it did. The way he'd cuddle and coo over him, especially in the beginning. The way his hand ruffled his fur in the exact same way.

"Who's my little champion?" he'd chuckle.

Fundy would try to shake him off, embarrassed, as everyone in the vicinity would laugh and congratulate Wilbur Soot on his "handsome, strapping son".

He had hated the childlike attention at the time, but also secretly loved it. He used to love his father too, but the distance that grew between them during the Revolution was irreparable. Suddenly, the General would have no time for his son, and the fox was thrust into the horrors of war and violence with as much indifference in his eyes as a

common soldier. He still spoke with his father here and there, but the bond they had before had all but disappeared.

Fundy followed the drills and training of the other troops, while Wilbur watched on from above. He received the same punishments as well, if they were needed. There was no favouritism, and if one was new to L'Manberg, you would never have guessed that one of the lowly foot soldiers was the General's own son.

Fundy had been jealous. He had been jealous of his father's status and charisma, his bold leadership skills, and the recognition he was given. The people had showered him with appreciation and unwavering loyalty, and Fundy wanted that too, desperately. He also hated to admit it now, especially considering the recent events concerning the boy, but he had been wildly jealous of Tommy.

Wilbur had taken Tommy under his wing and had raised him to a military status that no young boy should bear until he was at least in his twenties. They ate together, thought up their battle plans, commanded the L'Manbergian troops... Even when the boy messed up, he would receive no consequences for his actions, except at most a stern talking-to from the General.

Almost overnight, Fundy had been replaced, and he would never forget or forgive that.

"Cheer up, Fundy!" Quackity nudged him back into reality.

The fox realized that the darkened thoughts from before had returned, and clouded his vision. "Just don't do that again," he mumbled, pulling his hat further down over his head.

To his surprise, his friend nodded. "Understood."

The paved road dipped down to a flat surface and enlarged. The light snow clouds that whistled around them had vanished, and it had turned considerably warmer. The travellers split from their crowded formation to rush off in different directions, and the buildings loomed over them.

Big Q continued walking down the middle of the road, gesturing grandly to the world around them. "This is the main street," he told the fox. "We call it The Strip."

The paved road split Las Nevadas into two. Both sides were long, and stretched out far, far into the distance, ending at the largest construction of them all, the mysterious

palace so imposing even from so far away. The rest of the buildings were crammed together, their bottom floors open out onto the street. Inside each one was something different. Over there, an open theatre. Across the street, a shop selling candied treats. A little further from that, a large terraced restaurant that drew in card players of all kinds who sat together and played rounds upon rounds of gin rummy and poker. Out on the strip, peddlers selling less than shady items scampered around, jumping out at unsuspecting visitors and charging high prices for junk and cheap items a surprising amount of people actually stopped to buy. Every single leisure commerce the SMP had ever had or heard of was there, flooded with people and visitors of all cultures, shapes, sizes, and species.

"We have everything you could ever want," Quackity continued. "Hotels, taverns, shops..."

The fox was still adjusting to the ambiance of it all. Although night had already fallen, the lightshows of Las Nevadas was so bright that Fundy was disoriented. It could have been daytime for all he knew. To say that Fundy was dazzled would be an understatement. He was practically blinded.

The flashing lights he had seen from the station were much brighter than he had expected, and so much more colourful. Masses of small lamps flashed on and off in repeated sequences on the sides of every building. Beacons stretched up into the sky, changing colour every so often. His acute hearing managed to pick up the gentle creaks of gears hidden underneath The Strip as repeaters, pistons and redstone lamps allowed this clearly capitalist empire to function.

A delicious whiff of roasted meat wafted towards him, and Fundy breathed in the air, eyes closed. There was something so sweet about it, with hints of honey and lemon tingling his nostrils. He opened his mouth to hume them better, and the smell managed to veer him off his path and entice him towards a tavern-looking, lantern lit restaurant. Peering inside, he could glimpse a large pig slowly being turned and roasted over an open fireplace. His stomach growled in protest, the chicken he ate on the train suddenly seeming like nothing more than a bite-sized morsel in comparison to the monster of a swine being cooked in front of him. It made his mouth water.

"Fundy!"

The fox stopped drooling at the food, and stepped back. His eyes darted upwards, curious. When he saw the joint's logo and name, his shoulders sagged, and his wonderment and hunger disappeared as quickly as they had come. With the image of a

crowned pig's decapitated head brutally chopped in two hanging over the entrance, "The Butcher's Axe" and its food suddenly seemed a lot less appealing to him.

"They'll be time to eat later," Big Q tutted, rejoining his friend's side. He gently steered him away from the restaurant, and back onto the middle of the Strip.

He made no comment about Fundy's darkened expression, or the way the fox eyed him with slight contempt and dread. He pulled him straight down the road, whizzing him past all the dazzling lights, odours and noises. Shops, hotels and restaurants flew past in a blur, and the fox almost tripped over his own feet in the rush. He raised his gaze, and sucked in a breath as the biggest building of them all grew closer and closer.

It was the one he had glimpsed from afar, the palace. Tall, white brick walls and a myriad of finely sculpted windows lined up along the facade. Spotless glass reflected the colourful lights of the rest of Las Nevadas, lighting up the building like a Christmas tree. It was so tall that Fundy couldn't even make out its roof. Glancing around him, he noticed that more and more people were also rushing past the shops and other entertainment to head in the same direction.

Quackity suddenly let go of Fundy, and strode towards the polished, dark oak doors of the palace-like construction. "This is where the fun *really* begins," he smirked, pushing them open with his shoulder. The heavy oak doors slammed back, and Quackity turned to the room before them with a pompous gesture. "*This* is the Casino."

The inside of the building was unlike anything Fundy had ever seen in his life, and the splendour rooted him to the spot. The slight chill of the outside world was swiftly replaced by a luxurious warmth. The Casino looked like a palace on the outside, and it definitely stayed true to that theme on the inside.

The walls were made of polished white marble, and draped with velvet curtains of gold and crimson red, decorated with murals of silver vines and stars. It looked strangely like a temple or some sort of place of worship, mixed in with an ornate theatre. A grand staircase carpeted with crimson led to the floors above, where more people sat at candlelit tables, peering over the golden balustrades of the balconies dotted around.

The ground floor, however, was where Fundy's eyes were currently glued to. The richly carpeted floor muffled any footsteps there might have been, but among the endless streams of idle chatter from the many visitors, mechanical whirrs and clashes of falling coins pierced the air. Rows upon rows of stout, rectangular machines plated with gold and copper rattled and clanked. Further into the room, large card tables for games

like poker and blackjack sat, crammed with players testing their luck and throwing away their savings.

Fundy was rooted to the spot, and took no notice of the crowd pushing past him from the outside. The eager travellers rushed to claim spots at the games and prepared their valuables, all while polite and up-tight waiters weaved in and out of them to offer drinks served in intricate crystal glasses and plates of small *canapés*.

"This is..." Fundy was genuinely lost for words, dazed by the spectacle before him.

Furtively, he brushed his paws against one of the strange machines, and closed his eyes. He could easily picture the gears and redstone churning within, and it filled him with a strange sense of calm.

The fox opened his eyes again, and watched one of the machines in action. A man sat down in front of it, removed his silk travelling cloak, and removed a pouch from an inside pocket. He took out a small gold coin, and pushed it into a slot on the front of the machine. It fell in with a small *clank* and greedily, he wrapped his hand around a hand crank on the side. He wasted no time in pulling it down. The machine whirred to life, and the three wheels on the front spun wildly, before stopping each in turn.

Star, diamond, apple.

That didn't deter the player. If anything, it made him more determined to win, and he inserted another coin, but not without shooting his observer a strange look.

Fundy stepped back, and left him to his gambling. He raised his eyes to the ceiling, and marvelled at the enormous, crystal chandelier hanging down over the room. At that moment, like many other visitors to Las Nevadas, he finally let his emotions run wild.

"This is amazing!"

All the anger and sadness that had overwhelmed him for so long suddenly seemed to have blown away, replaced by a strange sense of excitement and a delighted high.

Fundy started darting all over the ground floor, pointing out things that caught his attention and asking thousands of questions. Quackity followed behind him with a much more moderated pace and a smile, patiently commenting and answering his questions.

"It's huge! How long have you been working on this place?"

"Not as long as you might think, actually. I had a good team who helped me with a lot of it. They're the real heroes." His smug grin however clearly showed that the modesty was simply a way to mask the egotistical pride welling within.

"How do these machines work? They look state of the art!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask the engineers about that, Fundy."

"What happens if they break down?"

"I have someone good who knows his way around redstone. I just have to send him a message when they jam and he'll come out or assign an engineer."

"Is that a cocktail?"

"Actually, no, it's a little stronger than that– *Fundy! Not that fast!*"

The fox gagged as the clear vodka burned his throat, and he doubled over. The waiter caught the empty glass just before it fell to the floor. He shook his head in despair, clearly used to indulging the antics of yet another ecstatic customer, and carried the empty tray back to the mahogany bar along one of the far walls. The fox continued choking, panting frantically. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes, and he swallowed hard.

"I did warn you," Big Q tutted, helping him.

"A little too late..." the victim coughed, his voice strained. He looked around him, his eyes locked on the games, one by one. Most of the interesting slot machines were already taken, but the poker tables had a few empty spots...

"You wanna play?" Quackity asked him.

Fundy briefly hesitated before nodding. "A little," he admitted. He slipped his hand into his pocket, and fumbled around for a bit. All he seemed to have on him were a couple of gold and silver coins, barely enough to buy himself a decent meal, let alone gamble with.

His friend stared at him, knowing. "Feeling lucky?"

If I had a bit more money right now, I might. "Yeah," the fox replied, half-heartedly. "I am."

When he got no reply, Fundy crossed his gaze. Big Q was still staring him down, his eyes boring into his. One of them was dark brown and clear, while the other, injured by the large scar slashed across it, burned a little duller. In the flashing lights of the casino, his pupils sparked. When he spoke again, his tone was low and sombre. "Are you really?"

A cold chill suddenly ran up Fundy's spine. "I... do you mean... Am I really feeling lucky?"

"Are you?"

The fox didn't like the sudden change in tone. The giant room suddenly seemed to close in around him, and he gulped, mulling over his answer ever so carefully.

"This is a serious question, Fundy," Quackity told him, narrowing his eyes. "Are you feeling lucky?"

"I don't have anything to gamble," Fundy said truthfully.

"Everyone does," his friend replied. "Everyone has something to lose. Are you ready to gamble that?"

The fox didn't know what he meant. What was he insinuating? What was he ready, or not ready, to gamble away? When he agreed, he did so more out of curiosity than anything. "I am," he answered. "I'm feeling lucky."

Quackity's lips curved up into a smile. "In that case—" He grabbed his friend's arm, and began to drag him away from the crowd. "—this isn't where you'll want to play."

Before Fundy could ask him what he meant, Big Q dragged him through the crowd. The mood had suddenly switched, and Fundy was a lot more nervous. His friend's attitude had changed. People he passed still called out to him and drank toasts in his and Las Nevadas' honour, but this time, Quackity didn't reply or acknowledge them. Instead, he led the fox past all the games and the crowd, and underneath the grand staircase. There, he unlocked a small door, and let the fox pass. Behind the threshold, a dark, dingy hall descended into a black abyss, and Fundy's fur bristled.

Big Q egged him on. "Follow it to the bottom," he urged. "I'll join you in a moment."

Fundy wanted to retract his previous statement, and leave the Casino, but from Quackity's eyes and expression, it was too late for that. So instead, he did as he was told, and followed the steps down. His eyes adjusted quite easily to the dark, and he continued walking. The stairs were steep, but not inherently dangerous in any way. Soon enough, he clambered down to the bottom, and stared in awe at the massive door in front of him. Door would have been an understatement. This was a fully fortified, vault-like barrier, with a myriad of different gears, pistons and repeaters keeping it shut.

Fundy sucked in a breath. "What is this place...?" he wondered out loud, only to be startled by the jangling of keys behind him.

Quackity had somehow stealthily snook down behind him, and was currently fiddling with a ring of keys. "My main redstone engineer let me borrow the design," he said. "If it's good enough for an impenetrable prison, it's good enough for Las Nevadas."

That single explanation was enough for Fundy to realize that this elusive "main redstone engineer" was none other than the Warden of Pandora's Vault. That put him even more on edge.

Quackity stuck one of the keys into a small, hidden keyhole in the wall, and turned it. With an impressive creak, the vault door slowly unlocked, and swung open on its hinges. Behind it sat a darkened room, and heads turned towards the door. It wasn't what Fundy had expected to find behind a highly fortified barrier.

Quackity however was far from fazed by the figures. He nudged Fundy forwards, silently gesturing to him to take his hat off. The fox did so, and nervously followed his friend.

"My friends," Big Q greeted warmly, his arms outstretched. "I've found us a new player." There was something considerably darker about his tone and mannerisms, and something mildly unsettling that the fox couldn't quite put his finger on.

Mumbles of approbation echoed throughout the gathering, although no one spoke with audible words. Wisps of silver smoke drifted lazily around. Sensing a dozen or so pairs of eyes on him, Fundy quickly bowed his head in a greeting. Quackity then led his friend towards the group, and he could get a better look at them and what they were sitting around. A single white spotlight lit up the centrepiece; a long rectangular table covered in a green cloth.

"Sit here," Big Q whispered.

The fox obeyed, and took his place in between two of the other members. He was about to open his mouth to say something – perhaps a greeting of some sort – but the deafening silence stopped him. No one spoke, no one moved.

Fundy took a good look at the gathering. The single spotlight made it hard to make out any telling details, especially as many of the assembled figures sat well out of its rays. A few of them wore dark, hooded cloaks that concealed their identity even more, their faces shrouded in darkness. A small ring of smoke puffed out from one of the figure's hoods, a wooden pipe shining in the low light. Looking to his sides, Fundy saw one of these hooded strangers to his right, and another to his left.

The sadness and despair that radiated from the group was unlike anything Fundy had ever felt before, and he realized with horror that he fit in perfectly with them. His own emotions welled up inside him, and he let out a long, shaky breath.

What was Big Q doing?

The negative aura was crushing his soul, and the image of the L'Manberg crater and the inviting, jagged rocks below seeped back into his mind.

The rest of the room itself was nothing but a black void. Quackity's footsteps echoed eerily as he walked away from his friend, and took his place at the far end of the table. A giant, intricately decorated roulette wheel sat before him, and he dragged his fingers over the golden handle fondly.

"My friends, let us begin."

In unison, every one of the "players" reached out to snatch up the casino counter in front of them. Fundy didn't move. He watched everyone else closely. The counters were taken, and all the strangers began to fiddle with them.

One of the figures next to him held their hand out, revealing white fur and a tan brown paw underneath the folds of his cloak. Fundy's eyes widened. "Antfrost...?" he managed to breathe out.

What was one of the Badlands' leaders doing in a crushing place like this?

The hooded figure froze, and slightly turned his head to the fox. Red eyes narrowed under the hood, staring into Fundy's own. A low growl escaped Antfrost's lips, indicating that he'd much rather remain anonymous. He then returned to his hand and his counter, and placed it on his wrist.

What Fundy witnessed next chilled him right to the bone.

The red and white counter seemed to latch on to the cat's fur like a blood-sucking leech, but instead of sucking on blood, it seemed to want to feast on something else. On the plain surface of the counter, something slowly began to appear. It was a picture, and from the breath the cat sucked in and the way his claws retracted, the fox could tell exactly what it was.

A blood red heart.

It was a life.

The counter was *taking* one of Antfrost's lives!

It took all of Fundy's self-restraint to not scream out loud and run away. His eyes stayed glued to the scene before him, terrified. Then, in a completely sane and natural manner, Antfrost removed the counter, and placed it in front of him before reclining back into the shadows. Fundy was still frozen to the spot, and cast a look around the gathering. Everyone was copying the same movement; wrist out, counter, life taken, and the counter back in front of them as if nothing had happened.

The fox let out a strangled gulp, and caught Big Q's gaze. It was dangerous, and expecting. "Fundy?" he asked out loud. "Is there a problem?"

The hiss in his tone made his fur bristle, and Fundy quickly shook his head. Silently, and with a shaking hand, he picked up the casino chip in front of him. It was smooth between his fingers, and perfectly rounded. It had very likely been polished beforehand, as the fox could see his reflection in it. Is this what Quackity meant by feeling lucky, and what he was ready to gamble?

Slowly, he drew his eyes away, and pulled his coat sleeve away from his hand. He closed his eyes, and placed the counter on his wrist. Immediately, it seemed to stick, digging into his skin. Tiny teeth or needles were shoved into his flesh, and he had to bite his tongue until it bled to avoid crying out. A wave washed over him, and he felt like his life was getting sucked out of him. Which was exactly what was happening.

After a moment or two of intense agony, Fundy finally felt like he could breathe again. Opening an eye, he looked down. The counter now had a heart on it, and no longer latched on to his wrist. Gingerly, he removed it, and placed it in front of him. He eyed it nervously, like it was going to leap back onto him and suck out his final life like a vampire.

"Thank you, Fundy," Quackity smiled, his grin crooked in more than one way. His golden tooth glimmered. He spun the roulette once. "Place your bets."

Fundy now turned his attention to the strange grid in front of the gathering on the table. It had multiple different squares with numbers ranging from one to thirty six, each one either coloured red or black. The only other extra square was the number zero, coloured green.

The fox may have been new to the Casino, but he knew what roulette was. He had played a couple of rounds with President Schlatt during his time in his Manberg administration. He knew how to place a bet. But he also knew what the grid was supposed to look like. Betting options on this one were missing.

On Schlatt's personal set back in the Manberg days, there were sections to place bets on various groupings of numbers, the colours red or black, whether the number was odd or even, or if the numbers were high or low. This made the betting process a lot more relaxed and less stressful. Now, not only was Fundy betting one of his lives away, he had to be precise with his bet. Only the numbers mattered.

He watched the strangers around him before he did anything. Counters clattered against the green cloth as multiple bets were placed on the number seventeen. Two players decided to place theirs on the zero's square, and Antfrost placed his on number two.

Silence fell as everyone retreated back into the shadows.

"Two bets haven't been placed," Quackity's voice said softly.

Fundy gazed down at his counter. His life was right there in front of him. He had to make this one count. After a minute of hesitation, the fox placed his counter on number sixteen, honouring what had been one of the simultaneously best and worst days of his life.

"One bet still hasn't been placed."

The last player leaned forwards, holding his counter in both hands. Fundy was shocked by his state. The man looked much older than he probably was, his eyes red and bloodshot, and his hair dishevelled. He looked – and smelt – like he hadn't washed in days, and his matted beard was greasy and unshaven. Most of the features on his face were sunken in, and the man's lips moved as he whispered something to himself, before

kissing the grimy ring on his hand. With shaking hands, he placed his counter on number twenty-one. He then lay his head between his arms, sprawled out on the table.

Quackity nodded. "Thank you both." With a flourish, he turned the handle. The roulette wheel began to spin, picking up speed. Peering inside, the three colours blurred into one, and the polished wood glimmered. Out of nowhere, Big Q produced a small, silver ball, and looked over the assembled once more. "Good luck to you all."

He dropped the ball. It clattered against the spinning sides, and rolled around the roulette.

No one spoke, patient. Tension filled the air, adding to the already oppressing sadness and negativity.

Fundy leaned forwards, holding his head in his hands. The dark emotions and problems he held on to weighed down heavily on his shoulders, crushing him into submission. His mind clouded, and he closed his eyes. He couldn't take this any more. Why did he trust Big Q? What was he doing here?

He was tired.

So tired...

The silver marble kept clanking and spinning for a while, until it all fell silent. Quackity announced something out loud, that came through as mere droning. Fundy didn't react, or move an inch. That was, until the silence dragged on for a little too long. Tentatively, the fox opened his eyes, and raised his head. The gathering was staring straight at him, and he panned from one side of the table to the other. He straightened his posture, sweating. Had he said something? What happened?

"Fundy," Quackity called to him, and his friend caught his gaze. He gestured to the inside of the roulette. "You've won."

The fox blinked in surprise. There, inside the wooden wheel, the silver ball was resting snugly in the little crevice, under the red number sixteen. He looked from the roulette, and back to his peers. No one made a move to stop him when he grabbed the counters off the grid, and placed them in front of him. They seemed to have accepted their defeat.

His shaky hands counted the tokens. Fourteen. Fourteen lives were now scattered out in front of him. He turned to Big Q, lost for words.

Quackity bowed his head, and clapped softly. "Beginner's luck," he smirked.

"Beginner's luck," mumbled everyone else in unison, like a silent prayer.

Fundy sat back in his seat, still reeling over the shock. His gaze dragged itself back to the older man in front of him. He was still lying down, head between his arms. He hadn't raised his head to even acknowledge the win, or congratulate the newcomer in any way. He was as still as a statue.

Quackity must have been watching Fundy carefully, as he walked around the table to the man in question, and placed a hand on his back. After a few moments, his crooked smirk faltered, and he shook his head. He stood back up, and snapped his fingers. From somewhere in the dark void of a room, two guards that Fundy hadn't noticed marched over, and carefully removed the man from his chair. His head lolled to the side, and they carried him off between them.

"Poor devil," Quackity sighed, walking back to his place at the head of the table. He spun the roulette again, absent-mindedly. "He came here every day after the death of his partner... Gambled every last one away."

Every last one. Fundy let out a strangled cry as he realized the man was dead. Nauseous, he looked down at the counters before him. *I killed him.*

He gingerly looked back up at his friend. Quackity was scowling, his expression darkened. Any macabre excitement he had during the game had vanished, replaced by an indecipherable expression. He stayed like that for a while, until one of the two guards came back. "Send a message to the Vault," he ordered. "Tell the Warden that it's of the utmost importance." The guard nodded, and left again. Quackity took a deep breath, and turned back to the table. "My friends," he smiled, a little more forced than before. "Does anyone wish to continue?"

No words were spoken. Those who apparently wished to stay remained in their seats, while the others left the table and silently faded into the shadows. Muffled footsteps accompanied their exit, and the heavy door clanged behind them. Antfrost was one of the ones who chose to leave, and perhaps that was for the best.

Now, only five players remained, including Fundy.

Quackity nodded, his genuine grin returning. "I'll ring for refreshments," he said, and gestured to the pile of vacant counters on the far side of the table. "Feel free to place your bets." After casting one last look towards Fundy, he left.

The rest of players, still retaining their vows of silence, reached for the new tokens, and began placing them on their wrists. Fundy didn't, however. He twirled one of his winnings between his paws, thinking deeply. The image of the man, dead, haunted him like a warning. But as much as he knew he shouldn't, the temptation to continue kept him glued to his seat. He mulled over the prospect of another bet, long and hard, and when Big Q returned, he had made his decision.

After taking a large swig of the red wine offered to him, he pushed all his tokens forwards, onto the number zero. Alcohol dripped out of the corner of his mouth and he greedily lapped it up with his tongue. His tail wagged and his eyes sparked, gleeful.

"All in," he smirked.

Chapter Fifteen: Hellfire

Although not directly a kingdom, unlike its name implied, Kinoko Kingdom was no less magnificent. It was something straight out of the legends of old. Lit up with the golden light of torches and glowstone, it glittered like a treasure trove in the forested valley. Tall, imposing pagodas and small, stout mushroom houses lined up along the mossy cobbled streets, flowers and fungi growing between the stones and on any patch of vacant land they could find. Up on one of the surrounding hills, the beautifully sculpted statue of a blue and purple dragon overlooked the main square of the land, where a large gathering had assembled.

The sky twinkled with thousands of stars shimmering brightly in the dark blue canopy. The high hills littered with groves of twisting oak trees basked in the moonlight, their leaves rustling gently against one another. Nighttime monsters prowled the clearings and hid between the oaks, staying well away from the light below.

Torches burned brightly in citizens' hands, casting soft beams of light onto swords, pitchforks, and silk-woven clothes. The crowd mumbled amongst themselves, their low voices and the crackles of the torches filling the air with the stagnant start of a riot. Occasionally, they cast wary looks towards the man sitting on the roots of the sturdy cherry tree that grew in the middle of the square.

Sapnap could feel their stares on him, but he tried to block them out. His head hurt from the constant streams of chatter and the last couple of sleepless nights. He

groaned. The warrior ran his hands – covered by thick gloves – through his black hair, disturbing the white silk band tied around his head. He shifted his weight a little, pulling his heavy oil skinned cape out from under him. He raised his head to the branches above, watching as the soft cherry blossom petals were whisked away by the nighttime breeze. Even the flowers seemed to be eager to leave him. He was alone.

He eyed the two guards standing by his side. Although they were well equipped with shining diamond armour and sharp sais, Sapnap reckoned could tackle them both easily.

He could, but he wouldn't. The crowd would lunge for him, and it would give them yet another reason to hate and accuse him. He didn't want that.

He was innocent. He *knew* he was innocent.

Why do they not believe me?

A creak jittered through the night and everyone's attention turned to the oak doors of the library. Settled in a small niche in one of the hills, the Kinoko library was the first building whose foundations were laid, and was renowned as a place of leather-bound knowledge and history.

The doors opened, and the Council began to file out. It was composed of older men and women, with long silky beards or grey-streaked hair. They moved slowly, each silently taking their place on either side of the entrance. Through the threshold, a fireplace roared. The books and parchments covered every wall, crammed together and accessible to very few. The people of Kinoko bowed their heads when the elders passed them, and the Council simultaneously returned the greetings with cordial smiles that stretched their wrinkled faces.

Sapnap didn't, however. He didn't even dare look at the members of the Council, let alone offer any form of respect, and from the looks he was getting from them, they weren't expecting him to either. He only stood up and focused his whole attention on them when the last two, youngest members emerged. One of them stood beside the rest of the Council, and the other made their way to the bottom of the stone staircase that led up to the cherry tree.

"Sapnap," he called in a soft tone, "could you please come closer?"

Narrowing his eyes, the accused did as he was told. With his head held high, he marched forwards a couple of steps, halfway down the staircase. "I didn't do it," he told him yet again, as he had been doing so often in the past day.

"We're not going to have this conversation again."

Sapnap's blood began to boil. "You still don't believe me?"

The answer he received was neither confirming nor denying the warrior's supposition. "The evidence was there." It was blunt, stating the facts.

He couldn't take it any more, and he finally lashed out. "What evidence?!" he yelled. The guards swiftly held him back, their weapons pressed warningly into his side. "There was nothing to tie me to it, you said so yourself!"

With a gesture, the head of the Council ordered the soldiers to back down. "You single-handedly caused a pet massacre in the Greater SMP," he said, remaining remarkably calm and composed.

Sapnap huffed. "That was a long time ago," he pointed out, ripping his arm away from the iron grasp of one of the guards.

"That doesn't mean it couldn't happen again."

"You're holding my past against me. That's no "evidence" to convict someone on."

"Need I remind you," the other spoke again, "That horses and frogs are sacred to Kinoko?"

Sapnap lowered his tone. "I would never hurt Kinoko," he told him solemnly. "I helped build it from the ground up. I would never, *ever* do anything to harm it or its people. I made a promise."

"What about its animals?"

"*I didn't do it!*" the warrior yelled again, frantically looking at the assembled crowd. "I just wish someone would believe me!"

From the hostile looks he was getting, no one did.

Karl sighed. "Sapnap, please don't make this harder—" he begged, only to be cut off.

Sapnap glared at him. "Make what harder?" he snarled.

"The sentence."

Silence fell. Sapnap's mouth went dry, and his head spun. "What do you mean, the sentence...?"

Karl took a deep breath. His short brown, curly hair was a mess, and his purple and green attire was scrunched up after hours of discussion and intense debate inside the library. "The Council has discussed the issue," he began.

"I should have been there to fight for myself," Sapnap spat. "I'm a part of it."

"It was best if the convict didn't participate."

"The *convict*?!" he spluttered. "You already condemned me when you went in?!"

"That's not the point," Karl brushed his questions off, and continued. "We spoke long and hard about what to do with you..." He turned his head to the Council lined up behind him. "Many advocated for imprisonment."

"Imprisonment?" Sapnap repeated, horrified. Regaining his composure, he shook his head. "House arrest, you mean?" Kinoko didn't have a prison; there had been no need for one until, it seemed, now.

Karl paused, then shook his head. "No."

"Then where—"

"It doesn't matter any more," Karl interrupted. "The idea was abandoned. The Council felt like there was no reason to involve the Badlands in this."

The Badlands.

"You..." Sapnap trailed off, shocked. "You were going to lock me in the Vault, weren't you?"

Mumbles of surprise and dread rippled throughout the crowd. Even the two guards gave each other an uneasy look.

"As I said," Karl repeated through gritted teeth, in an effort to somehow appease his people. "The idea was abandoned."

"But you thought about it."

No fair trial, and a possible sentence inside Pandora's Vault. A sharp feeling pierced right through Sapnap's heart. His voice was hoarse when he spoke his next words.

"You were willing to let me rot..." he murmured. "Do you not love me any more?"

His partner stayed silent, his head bowed. He made no move to confirm or deny the claims, and refused to open his mouth. The green, angular spiral on the front of his clothes seemed to shimmer mysteriously in the torchlight, hypnotizing and distracting to all who lay eyes on it.

"You don't, do you?"

Karl lost his temper. "If I didn't still love you, you would have been executed on the spot!" he screamed, his face turning red.

Sapnap stepped back at the outburst, and said nothing. Karl must have realized he had lost his cool, as he quickly lowered his tone.

"The crime is blasphemy," he said softly. "The punishment for such a crime is death."

"I didn't do it," Sapnap repeated yet again, shaken by the thought of hanging or decapitation.

"That doesn't change what has been decided."

"Karl, you're in charge here. They'll listen to you!" The warrior had to try something, anything, to get Karl to see straight. The way he eyed him made him nauseous, and uneasy.

Ignoring his plea, Karl turned away, and raised his voice to the crowd. "The Kinoko Council has found you guilty of blasphemy by the murder of numerous sacred animals. However, your duty and service towards Kinoko has not been forgotten, and thus the Council has decided to lighten the sentence." He paused, and with a shaky breath, faced the convict. "Sapnap, from this moment on, you are hereby exiled from Kinoko Kingdom. You have until dawn to leave the land, or else patrols and guards have the order to kill you on sight."

The crowd agreed with an orchestra of yells. Weapons and torches were raised, and Sapnap was scared that they were going to impale him right there and then. "Murderer!" someone yelled, starting the repeated chanting.

"Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!"

A breeze whipped past, ripping more blossoms off the tree, and sending them pirouetting into the crowd, and into Karl's hair. They rested on his locks like gentle droplets, forming a small, delicate crown. Even nature itself appeared to be on Karl's side.

Exile.

Suddenly, death seemed much more appealing to Sapnap, and his tone changed. "Karl! No!" he yelled, reaching out for him. His fingers slipped on his silk sleeve, and he crumbled to the ground. "You can't do this! You can't send me away!" He was ready to throw himself into the angry mob if the need came to be.

"I don't want to," Karl replied, his expression pained. He too made a move to reach out to his partner, but then stopped, and drew back. "But I need to think of Kinoko before everything else."

"Don't you see what's happening here?" the warrior gasped. "History is repeating itself!" He was starting to see too many parallels between what was happening to him right now, and a similar situation involving Tommy. He didn't want anyone to get hurt.

"No, it won't." Karl assured him.

Sapnap stared into his eyes. Karl's expression was indecipherable, and shrouded with mystery. His smokey grey eyes always seemed to hold some sort of power, hide some sort of knowledge or wisdom. Karl may have been a young man, but his eyes looked hundreds of years older than he was. They looked like they were forged from Time itself.

"How do you know...?" the warrior asked, unsure and on the verge of tears.

Karl didn't provide a clear answer. "I just do," he replied simply, his reply as mysterious as his gaze. After one last look, he turned away. "You should prepare to leave."

"Look at me, Karl!" Sapnap yelled, standing up.

His partner turned around, narrowing his eyes. "What?"

The fireborn gestured to himself. "Look at me one last time, and remember that you did this to me!"

"If you think this is the worst thing I've had to do or witness, you are sorely mistaken," Karl sighed, his tone dry and serious. He walked away from the cherry tree, and moved the crowd with a simple wave. "Let him through."

"Get going," one of the guards ordered, shoving Sapnap with the end of his weapon. The warrior, after spinning around and growling at the soldier, looked back to where Karl was, only to find an empty spot and the doors of the library slowly closing. Sapnap didn't even try to fight back, and let himself be dragged away.



"Sapnap, I—"

"You didn't even fight for me, did you?" he spat, angrily shoving a meagre set of belongings into his satchel.

His mushroom home, although lit up fully, now seemed much more sombre than before. The bright red and orange silks and curtains adorning the walls seemed to lose their fiery spark, and every dark corner stared back ominously. Sapnap stormed back and forth, grabbing what he needed and thrusting them into his bag.

"I did!" George spluttered. "I did, Sapnap! But do you know how hard it is to change the Council's mind..."

Sapnap angrily threw down the bag he was packing, hitting the table with a dull thump. A couple of golden apples and a few gold coins rolled out, dropping onto the floor and bouncing off into the dark corners of the room. The warrior turned to the man near the door, glaring. "You didn't try hard enough," he growled.

Instead of snapping back, George diverted his gaze. He picked at a small cherry blossom petal on his blue sleeve, and adjusted the large mushroom hat on his head. "I tried my best, Nick. It was just—"

"Just what?" the fireborn spat, getting down on his hands and knees to scamper after the fallen items. "Just what, George?"

"I just tried my best, alright? But once they're focused on what they want, they're too stubborn to reconsider!"

Sapnap cursed as he stood up too quickly, hitting his head on the corner of the table. "Well, it wasn't good enough!" he told him angrily, rubbing the back of his head. The warmth radiating from his gloved hand soothed the bruise, and he let out a small sigh.

"Are you alright?" His friend made a move towards him, only to be swatted away.

"Just, forget it..." Sapnap muttered. "The bruise, the trial, everything..."

"How can I?" George replied. "You're getting exiled! EXILED!"

"I'm well aware, thanks for reminding me..."

"It's not fair... They didn't even listen to your side of the story!"

"Then you should have fought for me!" Sapnap hissed again. "And maybe they would have!"

George shook his head. "I told you, I—"

"Tried your best?" The warrior scoffed. "You've always been too soft, George; that's your problem."

His friend spluttered. "Soft? What do you mean?"

"Oh come on!" Sapnap exclaimed, finally deciding to tell him what he thought. He turned to him.

George's complexion was fair and pale, with dark, ebony hair cut short. His features were soft and rounded, and he always looked like he had a gentle, caring expression on his face. Underneath his dark-lensed goggles, his eyes glistened. He was a little shorter than Sapnap, with quite a slender figure. He seemed much more suited to picking flowers and reading than fighting and hunting.

"Just because you have pretty privilege doesn't mean everything has to be handed to you on a platter," Sapnap continued.

"You think I don't know that?" George answered as a light, humiliated blush dusted his cheeks. He shifted from foot to foot.

Sapnap wasn't done. "When you were dethroned, I was ready to fight the world for you," he reminded him. "No matter how hard or how much blood I would have to spill, I was ready to help you reclaim your throne!"

George flinched. "I never asked you to," he said.

"You didn't, but I still did! I still did because you're my friend, George! I was ready to fight the world for you!"

"And so was I!" his friend interrupted him, to his surprise. "But I know when the battle is hopeless! I knew I was never going to get the crown back, so I gave up! I know when to stop! You don't!"

Sapnap growled. "You're too soft!"

"You're too reckless!" George answered back. The argument was getting heated, and the way their voices raised showed that they knew it.

"If Clay was here, maybe—" The warrior stopped immediately, and screwed his eyes shut. Silence suddenly fell between them both. Sapnap knew from his friend's absence of words that he had just messed up, and felt it deeply within himself as well. A heavy load tugged at his heart again. He mumbled an apology. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"It's fine," George quickly assured him. He took off his white goggles, fiddling with them between his fingers. With the clear view of his eyes, Sapnap could see exactly how much he was hurt by what he said.

"I'm sorry," he apologized again.

George gave him a small smile, which Sapnap immediately recognized as a fake. "I said it's fine," he repeated. "Anyway, you're right. Things would have been much different if Dream was here..."

"Do you still miss him?" Sapnap questioned. He knew it wasn't the time or place, but if he was never to see George again, he needed to know.

"Of course I do. He was my... best friend..." There was a slight hesitation. "Do you?"

"You know exactly what I think, Gogy," Sapnap replied, the affectionate nickname slipping out. "He was my best friend too." He didn't want to let George see the pain in his face, and so he turned away. He walked over to a small shelf, and gently removed two glass orbs. Rimmed with golden corks and clasped lids, they looked more like large

vials of some sort. Inside, basking in light, clear water, two small, tropical fish swam around and around in circles, their colourful tails swishing gently in the current and their scales and bright eyes glimmering in the lantern light. Sapnap took particular care with both his fish, settling their capped bowls at the bottom of his sack, cushioned by the spare changes of clothes he packed.

He was NOT going to let anyone get their hands on Mars or Beckerson ever again, no matter what the cost would be, in cash or blood.

"The Dream Team, eh?" George let out a small chuckle, still seemingly caught up in their conversation. "That didn't last long did it?"

"It was his own fault," Sapnap suddenly said,. He stuffed the apples and money back into his satchel. "Clay brought everything upon himself. He changed, and paid the price. What more is there to say?" As much as he tried to sound indifferent to the whole situation, it still pained him greatly. The thought of his old friend slowly rotting away in a prison cell was both agonizing and reassuring to think about.

Dream had become a monster, but he wished he hadn't. However, he couldn't do anything about it. He had tried, and had failed to help him. He was too far gone. *Deal with it.*

"He isn't all bad..." George whispered.

Sapnap sighed. "I know, but he had more bad than good in him." From George's silence, he spoke again. "We've all changed, haven't we?"

"Changed?"

"Since the beginning."

"I guess we have..." George shrugged. "I don't know, really. It's just not the same any more."

"We've changed," Sapnap concluded. "And I think everyone should stop pretending that we haven't..."

From what George said next, he must have picked up the bitterness in his tone. "Karl was the first to question the Council's decision," he said. "He fought for you in the meeting. He really did."

The warrior lingered a while, his fingers fumbling with the strings of his bag. Even though this knowledge appeased him a little, the fresh, open wound of betrayal still cut through him. "Then his methods are soft too," he spat, pulling the strings. The bag closed, and he swung it over his back.

"He managed to fight for a lighter punishment."

"So you do think I slaughtered those animals, don't you?"

"I don't know what to think any more," George sighed, shaking his head. "After all, you said so yourself; we've all changed."

Sapnap's face twisted into a scowl, and he grabbed his oilskin cloak. "I thought you were on my side," he growled. He snatched up his curved sword from the table, and shoved it back into its sheath. Without a second look, he stormed out of the door, shoving his old friend aside in the process. "Goodbye, George."

"Wait! Nick! Where will you go?"

"None of your business."

Ignoring George's calls, and without saying goodbye to his house, the warrior marched off into the night.

The cobbled roads were shining under the moon, the stones and vegetation damp from the gentle downpour that had since started. No one was out of the streets, but that didn't mean that Sapnap couldn't feel their burning gazes on him as he passed the rows of mushroom homes. Occasionally, he'd cast a look to the side, and anyone who would be caught quickly shut their windows and shutters. No one spoke to him, no one gave him a send off of any sort, except looks of contempt and fury. Sapnap raised the hood of his cloak over his head, and continued on. The bag bounced against his back as he quickened his pace.

He arrived in the square with the cherry tree. His boots ground the light carpet of pink petals into the forming puddles, as the warrior marched up the stairs to the centrepiece and took one last look at Kinoko Kingdom. Lantern and glowstone light poured out of the cracks in the windows and over doors, shimmering in the downpour.

Sapnap turned to the library. Now shuttered up, only one light still burned brightly, coming from a window on the second story. A silhouette slowly walked in front of it, a

heavy book in its hands. It stopped in the window frame, caught up in its reading. The warrior let out a low growl as he recognized the figure.

This is all your fault, Karl... he muttered to himself.

At that moment, Karl closed the book, and looked out of the window. His eyes were just visible from afar, and they were fixed on his partner. Sapnap stared back, defiant.

He had left his old home in a heartbeat when Karl had asked him to help found Kinoko. He had travelled far from the SMP, George at his side, to help his partner. He leapt to the Kingdom's defence so many times, without hesitation. He had vowed to love and protect his new realm just as much as he had vowed to love and protect Karl.

His partner had made the same vows, once.

The hardest thing about his punishment wasn't the exile; it was the way Karl, and everyone, seemed to care so little about the truth and him. Both his love and his home cast him out so easily, like a traitor. No one bothered to listen to him, or know his side to the story. No one had heard his pleas. His heart torn, he took a shaky breath.

Dream, and now Karl.

Was loss all he was ever going to receive? And for what? Which malicious gods were playing these games with him?

His stare hardened, and he looked down. A few specks of mud dotted his boots, and wet petals from the cherry tree fell down onto his hood. Karl had broken his promises, so why should Sapnap's matter any more? Why should he strive to keep them for people who couldn't care less? From the window, Karl turned away, and walked off. A moment or two later, the candlelight blew out, plunging the library completely into darkness.

With soft raindrops dripping down over his eyes, Sapnap removed one of his thick gloves. His hand burned a dull red, and his veins shined as bright as streams of lava from the Nether. The rain trickled down onto his palm, leaving behind dark, sizzling spots. The warrior flinched. Under his feet, the soft earth squelched ever so slightly, and a couple of water droplets ran down the tree trunk. Sapnap paused, suddenly rethinking his actions. He knew that what he was about to do would tear Kinoko apart, but one bitter thought pushed him forwards.

If his Karl was prepared to choose his nation over him, then so be it. He himself did not care any more.

Before he could change his mind, Sapnap placed his palm on the tree. The wood was cold under his fingertips for a second, then began to heat up. Before long, small flames escaped from his palm, licking at the bark and spitting when they touched a damp spot. The flames grew bigger and bigger as they feasted, lashing out and licking the rest of the tree.

Sapnap stood back, staring at the singed handprint he had left on the trunk. The fire built up and up, until the cherry tree was completely alight. The petals burned and spat, drifting their charred remains to the floor. The fire soon travelled down to the roots, and spread to the grassy ground beneath. Sapnap swiftly ran down the stairs, and watched the blazing cherry tree.

Particularly large sparks spat onto the cobbled square, now attacking the vegetation growing between the stones. Trails of flames soon formed, twisting and turning along their respective paths, and heading towards the nearest buildings. Sapnap fumbled with his glove, covering his hand once more, and gazed out across the square.

The plaza was ablaze after only a couple of minutes, the ground covered in a smouldering blanket of orange and red. The flames crept up the walls of the nearest buildings, before escaping onto the roofs and lighting the next one along. The library itself was mostly untouched for now, except for a few flickers darting up the vines. A couple of sparks landed on the hem of the warrior's cape, setting it alight. The oilskin didn't burn, and instead allowed the fire to smoulder over Sapnap, cloaking him in a blanket of lashing flames.

It was only a matter of time before citizens finally clocked on to what was happening, and rushed out of their houses. "Fire!" Screams pierced the air, and crowds gathered around the nearest wells with whatever container they could find. The air soon became unbreathable, filled with grey smoke. Bouts of coughing broke out as people darted left and right, trying to avoid the menacing flames.

Sapnap inhaled deeply, letting the smog fill his lungs. They burned, but he didn't care.

Kinoko Kingdom was no more than a blazing bonfire, and it was only a matter of time before the buildings began to cave in. The largest of the pagodas shook on its foundations, before the spires impaled the building in their fall and dragged down the walls in a cloud of smoke and crackling flames. Looking out across the destruction he

had created, Sapnap's tormented mind only repeated one sentence over and over again. After a deep breath, he finally let it out. "It was never meant to be."

"Over there!" a gruff voice yelled above the crackles and roars. The yell was soon followed by heavy footsteps and the clanking of heavy armour.

Sapnap spun around, and before the armed battalion could reach him, sais ready to impale him clean through, he threw an enderpearl, and disappeared in a flurry of fire and smoke.

Chapter Sixteen: New Day Dawning

"What are you doing?"

Sam turned, his hand on his knife. The question startled him, and the mossy ground had silenced the newcomer's footsteps. When he realized who it was however, he smiled. He leaned to the side, letting Tommy glimpse the lumps of wood in front of him. "Just carving."

The weather was mellow, the warm sun's rays trickling through the canopy of green trees overhead and running in gentle strokes across the greenery.

"I thought you were cutting up a body," the boy sniffed, sitting down beside him. He untied his boots, removed his socks, and dipped his bare feet into the gentle waters of the creek. The soft, damp moss sank a little under his weight, and his hand picked at a couple of white flowers growing between it.

Sam chuckled heartily at his assumption. "Valid guess, but a misplaced one."

"You seem like the type of guy to skin people alive in the middle of the forest," Tommy said, earning him another laugh. The sun caught the battered compass hanging from his neck, casting glowing gold shadows onto the ground beneath.

"I don't know how I should take that," the warden hummed, amused.

"Well, does being accused of being a serial killer sound like a compliment? C'mon, Sam."

Sam shook his head, and returned to his work. "Coming from you, it could be."

"Now you've offended me," Tommy tutted, in a tone that was anything but so.

"My apologies, big man," the warden smirked, picking up on his attitude.

"What are you carving?"

"Just things."

"Can I see?" Sam moved back a little to allow Tommy to inspect his work. The boy reached for the small objects, holding a couple of them gently in his hands. "Wow," he breathed, somewhat impressed. "These are pretty fucking poggers."

Language. "Thank you."

The warden smiled as the boy put the wood carvings back down. He had been sitting by the creek since noon, and had made a few of the carvings out of small logs and lumps he found laying around in the forest. The collection consisted so far of a small racoon – which from Tommy's smirk had been identified as Sam Nook – along with a bear's paw closed around a salmon, and a small trident. Sam's fingers worked quickly, and he knew his way around a knife. Keeping his thumb away from the blade, he chipped off the wood little by little. The splinters and bark drifted downwards and piled on his crossed legs. The stag head he had been working on for more than an hour now was almost complete, and he turned his focus to the eyes and the large, imposing antlers.

"They look like toys," Tommy pointed out.

"I guess they do," Sam agreed. He dug the tip of the knife into the sculpture's oval eye, digging out a pupil. "I honestly just make them for the sake of it."

The boy's eyes suddenly widened. "You could set up a business," he suggested greedily. "People would buy that shit in a heartbeat!"

The warden shook his head, smiling. "Not everything has to be turned into a money-making scheme, Tommy." With one last flick of his blade, the stag head was finished, and he proudly placed it down next to his other creations. "I just make them as a hobby. It's relaxing."

Tommy splashed his feet in the creek, flicking shiny droplets up in the air. "Shame," he mumbled.

"I could make you one if you want."

Tommy glanced over at him. "I'm good, thanks."

Sam however knew that he was only saying that to sound nonchalant and tough. The longing look in his eyes when he stared down at the sculptures didn't escape him, and neither did their strange comparison to toys.

Alright," Sam shrugged, trying to hide his smile. "That's fine." He grabbed another block of wood, and began to chip off the corners, patiently awaiting the reply he knew was going to come.

A moment or two passed. Sam counted silently.

One, two, three...

Then...

"Can you make a cow?" Tommy suddenly asked.

"I can try," the warden hummed, and got to work.

The rest of the afternoon went by slowly, with Sam carving and Tommy lazing in the sun by his side with a cat-like contentment. Their time together was anything but silent; Tommy always started up conversations that would plunge them in chatter for at least half an hour. Sam was pretty sure that if Tommy had stayed quiet, he would have finished the carving sooner, but he didn't mind in the slightest. The opportunity to unwind was much needed, for both of them.

"Can I become a prison guard?" Tommy suddenly asked.

"Absolutely not."

The boy pouted. "Why not?"

"Just because."

"Because what? I know how to fight and I'm smart!"

"It's too dangerous," Sam said, shaking his head. "I'd prefer it if I was the only one who looked after the Vault."

Tommy propped himself up on his elbows. "But imagine that bastard's face when he sees me patrolling outside his cell," he cackled, gleeful. "I'd give anything to see him lose his fucking mind over it!"

"Tommy," the warden sighed, his tone a little more serious. The blade of his knife nicked his thumb, drawing a thin line of blood. "In my honest opinion, I think it's better if you stayed far away from Dream."

"Why?"

Sam looked over at the boy. "I just have a bad feeling about you and him."

"Fine. I'll make one last visit to the prison though, alright? Last visit, I swear," the boy huffed, lying back down. "I need closure from the whole fucking thing anyway..."

The warden breathed a small sigh of relief. That would be one less thing to worry about in the long run.

"Here." He held out his hand, presenting his latest work to the boy. Tommy's eyes widened, and he sat up again. He cupped the small sculpture in his hands, his gaze alight with childish wonderment.

Sam had to admit that he was quite proud. He had taken particular care with this one, knowing it was going somewhere else other than a dusty chest back home. The cow he carved was a young calf, with smaller horns and thinner legs than a fully grown bovine. Perched on knobbly knees, it was turning its head up to the sky, an expression of joyful curiosity and large eyes perpetually engraved onto it. Apart from a few imperfections here and there where the knife had slipped, the carving was of a good quality. Excellent quality, in fact. Only the best for the boy.

"Thanks, Sam," Tommy smiled, seeming genuinely delighted.

"What are you going to name him?" Sam grinned. He didn't expect Tommy to answer him, but the question had slipped out ever so naturally. Perhaps it was the way the boy was behaving that caused it, he didn't know.

"Henry," Tommy said with no hesitation. "I'll name him Henry."

The warden raised his eyebrows. "That was quick."

Tommy took a couple of moments to answer. "I had a cow named Henry," he said. He frowned, and swallowed hard. "Sapnap killed him, a couple of years back. It was an accident, but he still killed him."

Sam gingerly put his things away, and sighed. "Yeah," he mumbled, sensing the mood suddenly turning sombre. "I heard... and I'm sorry."

"Eh, whatever." Tommy shrugged, and lay down again on the soft, damp moss. He twisted his green bandana straight again, then placed one of his hands on the compass. His eyes stared up vaguely at the sky, his other hand loosely resting around the wooden cow. "Things like that happen, and we can't do shit about it."

Looking down at the boy, Sam was turning worried once again. Tommy had been doing so good for so long, and had started to regain the usual, upbeat personality he had lost on Doomsday. Now, his gaze was clouded over, and his mouth pursed in a straight line.

The boy must have felt his worry, as he looked up at the warden. "Fucking hell, don't look so gloomy. It's all in the past."

"You shouldn't have to go through that." The passionate, protective feeling that had washed over him so many times before was back, and stronger than ever.

"It's fine, honestly," Tommy assured him. "It's all in the past. I'm good." He sat up, still gazing at the sculpture in his hands. "And now I have a really pog statue of him, and this one will never die."

Sam beamed brightly at the compliment and the optimistic change. "As long as you're alright..."

"I am, trust me," Tommy said, shaking his golden blond hair, trying to remove the stray strands of moss and other forest debris out of it. "Don't worry."

The warden helped him a little, removing a stray twig and a leaf. "I'll always worry for you," he told him, smirking at the boy's low grumbles and the way he swatted his hand away from his hair.

"I didn't ask you to," he muttered, trying to rearrange his locks, particularly on one side where a long and thin, pale scar stretched from his ear to his chin.

Sam stared at the scars and burns scattered across his skin. They were much paler now, and some had almost disappeared completely. The absence of wars and scuffles definitely made a difference to the boy, both physically and mentally. "No one has to ask anyone to look out for them, especially not you."

"I guess so..." Tommy still didn't seem convinced, or enthralled. He seemed much more cautious, and embarrassed. "Thanks though, Sam. You're not such a scary guy, outside of the prison I mean."

Sam smiled, his spirits lifted as Tommy started to pester him again with endless questions, as if nothing had happened. You're welcome, Tommy, he mumbled to himself.

Sam hadn't picked up a block of wood and a knife in ages. The last time he did, it had been to carve a name into a coffin. Ever since, he had locked everything relating to wood carving into a chest which he then hid in a dark corner, out of sight but far from out of mind.

Everything was stashed away, except for the small sculpture of the cow. That stayed exactly where it belonged, inside Tommy's house. When he passed by, and if he looked carefully through the large cracks in the oak doors, he could still see it, high up on a shelf. It still looked as jovial and bright as it had been when he had first carved it out of the raw wood. Regrettably, if he had known what was to come, he would have given it a much more sombre, sullen expression.

That said, it brought a bit of light into Tommy's old home. In the midst of all the heavy sorrow, a nice reminder of the happier times was much appreciated.

After leaving Snowchester, Sam had immediately made his way to Pandora's Vault. He had stayed only long enough to reclaim his weapons and his armour, and to perform a few security checks. He didn't visit Dream. He also searched around once more for the broken compass, to no avail. He eventually accepted that it was gone, and that there was no way of getting it back.

By the time he had exited the Vault, the moon was high in the sky, and the stars had come out to drape the velvet sky in a shimmering blanket. Sam knew he should have made his way home, and get some good rest. Recently, he had been lacking a healthy amount of sleep, and he feared that it would show when performing his duties.

He *should* have slept, but instead, he headed out to the moor. With a freshly picked bouquet of wild heather speckled with small glow-worms, he spent the rest of the night by the misshapen stone that marked Tommy's grave.

He didn't do much exactly. He lay down the flowers and brushed a little mud off the headstone, but nothing that could have been considered productive. He spent the rest of the time with his head bowed in mourning. Once or twice, he commented on the beautiful sky above, smiling softly. For a few moments, he would forget he was alone, until he realized that Tommy didn't interrupt him, or even reply. Then, he'd retreat back into the grief, allowing it to consume him. He'd apologize to the boy's memory, and fall silent again. The grief was still as deep and as fresh as it had been on the day it all happened, and he had a sinking feeling that it wouldn't go away anytime soon. While he didn't suddenly burst into tears any more, the sorrow never wavered – he had simply learned to control his reactions. It was difficult, but he managed to do it. That said, everything that reminded him of the boy did nothing but rub salt into the gaping wound.

He stayed beside the tomb until dawn broke, and the sun's rays started to peek over the hills. The heather was damp from the morning dew, and the nighttime creatures darted back to their burrows and homes as the warden headed back towards civilization.

On the way, he managed to pick up Sam Nook he found foraging for food in one of the spruce forests bordering the Greater SMP. With the racoon on Sam's shoulders, his cheeks full of sweet berries, he made his way to the closest Nether portal.

When Sam had returned after all those years away, the first thing he had done when he had found out what happened was make his home far away. So many had lost their houses and land because of the wars, and he didn't want to add to the tally. He had travelled far to seek a safe spot, and when he finally found one, told very few about its location. He had built a portal in the Nether to allow him to access it easily, hiding the entrance in a netherrack crevice. It was in a secluded part of the dimension, with no traces of any passing beings except for a small piglin settlement nearby. The two hour journey in the Nether would take over three days in the Overworld, and that was assuming one knew exactly where to head and stopped for nothing on the way.

It was a quiet and peaceful spot in the mountains, and Sam used to spend a lot of time there when he had first found it. He would spend countless hours developing redstone systems or gathering resources, all while basking in the glorious silence.

His feet skid on the pebble-strewn slopes leading up from the coastline. The salty water lapped at the rocks, their gentle sound accompanying the echoey hum of the Nether portal, hidden inside a nearby cave.

The sun had only begun to rise, but already, the light was blinding. Sam's golden armour glowed as brightly as the evening stars, casting glimmering shadows on the ground. Even Nook tried to shield his eyes from the glare with his small paws, fidgeting on his perch.

The warden squinted against the sun, gazing up at the jagged mountain peaks looming over him. An eagle screeched from the sky with a piercing voice, soaring effortlessly through the ether.

The grassy plains in between the rocks were much duller compared to those one would find on the mainland. They were much more moor-like, with rigid patches of vegetation and small clusters of wild bracken. Nothing stirred, save for a herd of wild sheep and mountain goats trotting up the mountainsides. The plateau gave a clear view out onto the ocean, stretching far and wide without a single building in sight. It was quiet, and it was far away from everything. It was a place very few knew of, and that even fewer ever visited.

Or at least, so Sam thought it was when he arrived there that morning.

He was surprised to find his door already open. "Door" was perhaps not the correct term for what it was; an enormous, impressive, mechanical gate would have fit better.

Sam had dug his base into the side of one of the mountains, and managed to hide the entrance thanks to hours of engineering and two cartloads of stone. The door itself was huge, and left a gaping hole in the side of the mountain when opened. It would take hours of searching to find the hidden lock and hours more to try and break in, which is what made the opened base even more puzzling and suspicious.

Sam stopped in his tracks, and turned to the racoon on his shoulder. "I'd suggest you stay back," he warned him, holding out his arm.

The animal scampered down it, but was clearly ready to do anything else than stand back. Nook flexed his little claws, and stealthily followed the warden as he marched forwards.

Sam grabbed the trident from behind his back, and held it tightly, prongs out. "Who's there?" he bellowed, a deep growl rumbling at the back of his throat. No reply came, and the warden entered the base.

The main area stretched out far back into the mountain, the walls made of finely polished stone. Chests carpeted the floor, messily placed and crammed full of different items, from ores to food. Sam hadn't bothered to sort them out or organize them yet – as long as they did what they were meant to do, he didn't care where they were. Low hanging shroomlight lamps lit up the darkened corners, glowing in perfect parallel to each other. The pumping and creaking of a few small, insignificant machines hummed in a gentle echo from his workshop, as they always did.

Casting looks around, Sam couldn't pick out anything out of the ordinary, until he saw a shadow stretch out across the back wall. As he got closer, he could finally hear a voice, and the aggressive yapping and snarling that accompanied it. He stopped, soon followed by the scampering footsteps belonging to Nook. With a wave, the warden told the racoon to back down once again and continued alone. The noises grew louder and louder, more and more comprehensive as time went on.

"Will you *quit* it! I'm not doing any harm– *Ow! get off me!*"

Sam quickened his pace until he arrived at the scene. Relieved to see his suspicions were correct, he let his trident drop, and crossed his arms.

In front of him, the trespasser froze. The items he had gathered up in his arms slipped from his grasp, and fell to the floor one by one. Sam Nook reached out a paw to gently tap a small diamond that rolled towards him. The thief still didn't move, fearful and held in place by the silver pelted dog growling at his heels. Occasionally, he shook his leg, causing the canine to chomp down harder on his trousers, snarling and dragging him backwards. The sound of torn stitches filled the air, and the trespasser cursed loudly.

"Who hurt you?" he muttered to the dog, shooting it an angry glare. Reaching up to his face, he lowered the red, yellow and black balaclava he wore, pulling it down over his mouth and silvery white hair.

Sam's arms were still crossed, staring at the intruder. "What are you doing in my house?"

The thief, seemingly having forgotten the fact he had been caught in the act, suddenly turned to Sam, eyes as wide as a frightened bunny. "I, uh..." He smiled nervously, and gave a little, miserable wave. "Hi Sam..."

"Hello, Ponk," the warden replied, his tone dry. "Now, what are you doing in my house?"

"Can you take your mask off?" Ponk asked him. "I can barely understand you."

Rolling his eyes, the warden lowered his gas-mask from his face, revealing his scowl. He waited silently for an answer.

"There's the hand-Sam dude I know!" Ponk laughed, shooting finger guns at the man.

The pun was endearing, but Sam didn't react. "Don't make me ask you again."

"Well... What are *you* doing here?" the thief challenged.

"I live here," Sam reminded him. "This is *my* house."

"Really? I thought you moved to Pandora's Vault."

"I don't know who you asked, but it's false information. And if you're not careful, you might be moving there too, whether you like it or not."

"Alright, alright!" Ponk shook his leg again, trying to pry it from the hound's teeth. "I'll tell you if you get your mutt off me."

Sam was inclined to leave the canine with her teeth sunken into his clothes. "She's doing a better job than shackles will," he mused.

Ponk's eyes widened even more, and he shook his leg again. "Please," he pleaded.

Sam waited a few more seconds, then sighed, and called the hound over. "Fran, heel."

At the mention of her name, the dog stopped growling. With the trousers still between her teeth, she looked over at her master. He hoped that his eyes were serious and demanding enough for her to obey him. Thankfully, it seemed they were, and Fran let go. She sat down heavily on her hind legs, tail sweeping the floor behind her. Letting

out a breathy huff, she used her tongue to try to pick out the loose bits of fibre and material from between her pearly white teeth.

Ponk glared down at his damaged clothes, and grumbled something Sam couldn't quite catch. "What was that?" the warden asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing," the thief replied.

"I thought it was something about what you were doing in my home."

"I..." Ponk trailed off again, and set about collecting the fallen items from the floor as quickly as he could. Looking closely, Sam saw that the findings mostly consisted of precious ores like diamonds, gold ingots and a few scraps of ancient debris, used to make netherite.

Sam watched him. "I'm waiting," he hummed, drumming his fingers on his elbow.

"Alright, listen Sammy," Ponk finally began. "I left a few things over here last time I came round. I mined them myself, and I'm just taking them back."

That was a lie if Sam had ever heard one. He had known Ponk for years, and if one thing was certain, it was that he had never mined or crafted anything for himself, or others for that matter.

Back when it had just been the original eight settlers of the SMP, it was everyone else who took care of Ponk's tool and weapon related needs. In exchange, he would take on a few easy repair tasks, farm here and there, and generally keep everyone in high spirits. Maybe that's why the seven others still considered him a crucial part of their small community.

There were two things that Ponk *was* good at, however: medicine and thievery.

The first skill had been rarely needed in their quiet, peaceful settlement, although his knowledge of different herbs was still much appreciated. The second one was mostly used for his own amusement, his targets ranging from a couple of carrots from a nearby village to honey from a wild beehive.

The only time it became a dangerous game was when he had managed to steal supplies and a horse from a nearby bandit camp. He had unintentionally led the pillagers to the Community House, and if Dream and Sapnap hadn't been there to scare

them off, the fight would have ended in a bloodbath and quite possibly the first ever war the Greater SMP lands would have witnessed.

Sam didn't believe Ponk's excuse for a second. He knew him too well. Nevertheless, his confidence amused him, so he played along. Sam feigned ignorance. "Oh, really?" he said, plastering a bewildered expression on his face.

Ponk's unsure attitude changed from nervous to confused. "Umm...yeah?" Clearly, he hadn't expected his lie to work, least of all on his long-time friend.

"My apologies, then," Sam mused, giving him a small bow. "I should have known better."

"Yeah... you should have!" Ponk picked up the last of the items, and scratched his head.

"And here's me thinking you'd steal from me." Sam smirked.

"Steal? From you?" The thief laughed. "You know I wouldn't, Sammy. I care about you too much!"

The reply considerably lifted Sam's spirits, and he couldn't help but roll his eyes. "I care about you too, you know that," he tutted, still attempting to hide his smile.

Ponk winked at him. "You bet I do."

Sam was about to make a comeback, when he suddenly crossed the thief's gaze. The red in his blue irises didn't escape him, and he faltered. Looking down, he spied a small, thin tendril curved around the light brown skin of Ponk's neck. Instead, his face fell, and he gave him a quick nod. "You're free to go," he mumbled.

Ponk seemed startled by the change in tone, but nevertheless started to make his way out of the base.

"Wait." Sam caught his friend when he passed him, and placed something onto the pile he carried. "You forgot this."

Ponk looked down, and stifled a shocked gasp as a netherite ingot glinted a dark, metallic black in the shroomlights. "I didn't... I..."

"Wait, it isn't yours?" Although his attitude was much more sombre now, Sam still kept up the game. "Doesn't matter. Consider it a present from me to you."

For a moment, Ponk said nothing, his eyes still glued to the ores in his arms. Sam didn't know what he was thinking, though perhaps the flash that crossed his eyes was some form of... guilt?

He looked ready to return everything on the spot, but stopped himself. "Sam, you're too nice!" he chuckled, nudging him gently.

The warden grinned, trying to avoid staring at the Egg's infection. "Just doing my duty," he replied.

Ponk laughed, putting his balaclava back on. "Damn, if that's your definition of duty, I should consider marrying you!"

Sam honestly didn't know if that was a joke or not. While Ponk's advances were plentiful, and sometimes reciprocated, they still caught the warden off guard. He didn't really know how to reply, at least truthfully. He coughed, clearing his throat. "Maybe you should," he mumbled, shifting from foot to foot. The air between them had changed yet again.

"Here. This is from me to you!" Reaching behind his neck, Ponk tugged at the small tendril, ripping it from wherever it was growing. Before Sam could react, he had tied it around the handle of his trident. The red tendril tightened on its own accord, growing thicker as it adjusted to its new home.

Sam knew better than to react negatively and ungrateful in front of his friend – the Egg's newest victim – so he simply smiled. "Thank you." He changed the subject as quickly as he could. "Now go, or I'll set Fran on you again."

The speed with which Ponk booked it was tremendous, and the redstone door closed behind him. Without the sunlight filtering in, the way the base basked in the gentle orange glow of the lamps made the whole place seem a lot cosier and homely. Immediately, Sam lunged at the tendril around his trident, tearing it off as fast as he could. The sharp thorns pricked him, but he pulled through, and threw it on the floor. For good measure, he brought his boot down on it, grinding it into the ground.

When he was sure that he wasn't at risk any more, he searched through a few chests. Here and there, he could clearly see empty spots where Ponk had robbed him, but that was the least of his worries then and there. Instead, he kept looking until he found a spool of red ribbon. He cut off a sizeable length, and tied it around his weapon. He breathed a sigh of relief. Crisis averted. If only it was that easy with every problem that presented itself to him.

He knew better than to completely hide his hate of the Egg, especially around its loyal slaves. He didn't know what would happen if he was exposed as a traitor.

The warden's first order of business now he had dealt with the disturbance was to give Fran all the attention and affection she so rightly deserved.

"Good girl," he murmured, scratching the silvery hound between her ears. "I'm sorry for leaving you alone for so long."

Fran pressed her forehead against his hand, whining happily. Her tail began to wag, and Sam Nook took the opportunity to chase after it, skidding left and right on the polished floor. Sam watched him absent-mindedly. He must have looked exhausted, as his dog stuck her wet nose into his face and placed a worried paw on his knee.

Snapping back to his tired reality, he gave her another pat. "Next time, though, go for his arm. That'll stop him constantly stealing from us. I don't know how many resources we'll have at this rate."

In response, Fran barked and rolled onto her stomach, demanding belly rubs. Bowing down to her whims, her master complied. At first, everything was going well, until the dog's ears perked up. She let out a whine, and backed away from Sam. Sam Nook, who had been toying with her fur, followed suit. The simply warden sighed, closing his eyes. Incoherent whispers began to echo through his home, and creep into his mind.

"I can't do anything about them," he apologized to his animals, who could apparently hear the Egg's hisses as well as he did. "I'm sorry..." He tried to block them out to the best of abilities, to no avail.

The omnipresent being must have felt one of its newest disciples near, or, just as likely, the rejection of the "gift", and had decided to torment Sam once again. He didn't understand what it was saying, and he never wanted to. Never again.

"Stop wasting your breath, I don't care about you any more..." The warden placed his hands over his ears, dulling the noise ever so slightly. He still couldn't understand it, and he didn't want to. "Whatever it is you want, you won't get it..." he muttered, picking up his trident. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the handle. "I won't let you get to Fran again..."

His hound let out a string of sharp barks, followed by Nook's high pitched babbling. Whether they were trying to drown out the noise or scared themselves, no

one could tell. All the warden knew was that the Egg wouldn't leave him alone, and probably wouldn't for the rest of the day – or the rest of his life, if he had to take a guess. If the Egg wasn't sorted out, the influence and the pain would only grow, and there was no telling to what extent.

Sam was ready to do anything to get rid of it, even if he had to sacrifice himself to do so. If there was a way to get it to leave him and his friends alone, he was ready to do whatever it took.

I will not fail them. Not this time...

Chapter Seventeen: A Gentle Song

There isn't any correct way to react when someone suddenly tells you that you might be a ghost. Some might find it terrifying, demanding to know how they died, asking where they were, and why. The shock would be unlike anything they had ever felt before, and the realization might end up driving them insane. Others, typically much more impulsive and chaotic souls, might be more impressed than anything, and find their new see-through body useful and great to scare people with.

The boy, however, didn't know how to respond.

All the strange occurrences certainly made sense now, from his strange paleness to the inability to burn in the lava. He didn't try to deny the truth. If anything, it settled in much better than anyone could have ever hoped. He had questions, sure, but could not find the words to formulate them even if he could talk. He didn't want to know most of the answers either – he had a feeling that he would be told things he wouldn't want to hear.

Clay had changed the subject soon after, seemingly realizing that he had said something the other hadn't expected. He had briefly apologized, and then focused on helping the boy find his way out of the obsidian maze. At first, he tried to do it orally, but he must have realized that the boy couldn't really visualize it properly. He went to retrieve one of the small books piled up in the corner of the room. The boy hadn't noticed them before, and wondered why Clay would spend his time moping against the back wall when he had things to do.

"I've already filled them all in," the man said, almost reading his mind. He flipped one open, and tore a page out. He then chucked the book away, knocking over the pile with pinpoint accuracy. "Or burned them. Either way, Sam won't give me any new ones."

Clay beckoned the boy over to one of the walls, and laid the paper on top of the rough, bumpy surface. The boy watched him curiously as he began to scratch a makeshift map into the parchment with the tip of his finger, dipped in the dripping goo of the crying obsidian walls. The colour came out a dark purple, tinted with black grime. If the boy had to guess, any other writing utensil had been lost to the lava as well.

"Right. We're here," Clay began, pointing at the large square at the top of the page. He dragged his hand down, drawing multiple lines of different lengths and directions. "This is the visitor's path. It's a pretty long trek, and there are many different doors and security measures to go through. That shouldn't be an issue though, right?"

The boy's hand closed around the compass, and blinked at the man.

"You can walk through walls, can't you?"

At the blunt question, he couldn't do anything but shrug. His fingers fiddled with the lid of his pendant, opening it and snapping it shut over and over again.

Clay paused for a moment. "Well, I don't see why you wouldn't be able to," he shrugged, turning back to his map. "But anyway, I would suggest you take the warden's path back to the Vault's main entrance." He dipped his finger in the purple liquid again, and sketched out more lines running parallel to his previous ones. "It'll be quicker and less eventful, trust me."

The boy moved closer to the paper, and squinted at the map. The lines were hard to read in the dark and with the red spots flashing in front of his eyes, it took him a while to follow the correct path down to the bottom of the page.

"However, once you get here—" He pointed to a square. "—there's no exit unless the Nether portal happens to be lit."

Nether portal?

"Do you understand?"

The boy shot him a glare. *I can still see. I'm not completely useless.*

Clay either didn't see his look, or chose to purposely ignore it. "I think you're good to go," he said, handing him the paper. The ghost held it in his trembling, pale hands, staring once more at the route. The man gave him a little salute. "Stay safe! Although, you always find a way to pull through, don't you?"

The boy tilted his head, puzzled by the comment. Did he... did he know Clay? Did Clay know him? There was no way he could ask, but he still found what he said strangely poignant.

"Can you just promise me something small?" the man asked suddenly.

After everything he had done for him, the boy nodded immediately.

Clay smiled back at him, perhaps a little sadly. "Promise me you'll visit from time to time, alright?" His tone seemed to drop, turning his overall expression a little darker. "That's all I ask of you. It can get a little lonely here, and the warden isn't exactly what I would call delightful company." The ghost's eyes widened, slightly concerned for the man's change, but nevertheless agreed. Clay's face lit up when he did, and his attitude changed. "Good luck, then."

The boy was ready to leave the black room, but stopped. Instead, he turned around and walked over to the nearest wall. He turned the makeshift map over. The other side of the page was covered in scrawls and doodles he didn't take the time to scrutinize. He reached up to the nearest dip of purple goo, and let it drip onto his finger.

It was a strange feeling at first. Although he was a spirit, the liquid stayed on and didn't fall through him. He began to drag the tip of his finger over the parchment. His handwriting was sloppy and shaky, but with enough determination, he managed to get his message across. His first words to Clay.

Thank you

He turned around and stared at Clay, expecting. The man's mouth curved up into a smile, and he scrawled something else beneath it.

You're welcome :)

Clay was right when he described the building as a maze. The whole complex was so dark that without a map of some sort, the ghost could have easily got lost. Which he already had done.

Now, he knew where he was going. At least, he sort of did.

One thing that he had slightly forgotten about was that paper was not fire-resistant, and the torn out page had burst into flames the moment it had touched the lava. The boy had only realized when he came out on the other side of the lava curtain, when there was nothing left but smouldering ashes in his palm.

The compass itself, still hanging around his neck, had remained intact, albeit a little singed in places. The boy's ghostly hand clasped around it must have protected it from the lava somehow. That, or the compass was magic.

With no map, the boy thought it would be impossible to get out. It was only when he looked closely towards the shadows that he could see the hidden entrance Clay had mentioned.

All he had to do then was follow it wherever it led.

The warden's path was one that the ghost was surprisingly familiar with already. When he had followed the golden armoured figure that other time, he had walked those hallway. He just didn't know they led anywhere other than towards Clay.

Heading in the opposite direction, the boy could now finally sense he was getting somewhere. Occasionally, the hallways ended in different rooms, rooms that he surprisingly recognized, even in the dark. As he advanced, he began to realize how close he had been to the exit so many times. He passed all sorts of rooms, from ones full to the brim with strange machines to walls of dark cells locked by iron doors and sturdy metal bars. Occasionally, a gear would creak or a lava pocket would pop, but otherwise, the complex was completely silent.

The trek lasted a while, and only seemed to end when the ghost entered a large room decorated with white columns. The ceiling was much higher here, and he felt like he could finally breathe freely again. He inhaled deeply, his throat burning from the unusual feeling. It was still dark, but the white pillars were clearly visible.

The boy followed the row of columns down to the back wall, where he stood in awe of the large, obsidian frame. Positioned like a doorway, the ghost realized that it must have been the exit his guide had mentioned. Although it wasn't lit, it was still

impressive to squint at through the darkness. Clay was right once again; there was no exit, except for the portal frame.

"You can walk through walls, can't you?"

He still didn't know if he could. He hadn't really tried. Lava was one thing, a solid wall was another.

If I want to get out of this place, I have to try...

The ghost took a deep, shaky breath, and immediately burst out coughing. His throat did nothing to help the situation, and he had to wait a while until the pain numbed. How was one even supposed to walk through a wall?

The boy placed his hands on the blackstone wall behind the portal frame. It was hard and rough under his fingertips. He tried pushing, to no avail. He tried kicking it as well, also with no success. His muscles ached and burned, but he kept trying. The pushing, the pulling and the shoving got him nowhere, and he stopped.

His temper had risen to a boiling point, and made him see red once again. He forced himself to calm down, and took a step back. He kept his hands on the wall, and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. He let himself fall into a trance, ignoring the bitter cold of the air around him. Gently, he pushed forwards once again. The blackstone wall suddenly seemed to mould under the pressure, and creep up his arms. He risked a look, and sucked in a breath as his hands were now gone, swallowed up by the wall.

I did it! Nervously, he closed his eyes again, and suppressed the nerves building up within him. *Stay calm...* He relaxed his muscles, and took a step forward.

Immediately, his senses were overcome by a pitch black void. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. A slow, rhythmic hum echoed in his ears, making him light-headed and slow his pace. His feet weighed him down, but he forced himself to keep walking on.

When he finally opened his eyes, he was blinded by a bright light. He sucked in a large, pained breath, his head spinning. He turned around quickly, too quickly perhaps, and tripped over his own feet. His fists hit the wall, breaking his fall but sending painful vibrations throughout his body. He pulled away as fast as he could, rubbing his palms. The boy looked up.

The hard black walls stretched all the way up to the sky, looming over him and his pale figure. Dark red magma burned behind the iron bars set into the facade, popping and sizzling. The sky was a pale blue, disturbed only by a few wisps of white clouds and a couple of passing seagulls. The sun's rays shone brightly from behind one of the colossal towers, hitting his eyes and forcing him to look away. The ghost silently trod along the dark pebbled beach front, transfixed by the expanse of dark blue sea crashing against it. The ocean seemed to stretch out for miles and miles in one direction.

The screeching of unknown birds pierced through the air once again, scaring the boy. His hands immediately went to close around the compass. He looked down when he realized that there was nothing there but thin air. Suddenly frantic, he began to search around him. In the sunlight, the compass would have glinted. It would have been easy to find, right? The golden trinket was nowhere to be found, and the ghost's anxiety began to skyrocket.

Did he lose it in the lava?

In the halls?

On the other side of the wall?

The red spots in his vision increased, and he fell to his knees. The salt water lapped at his feet, and he immediately leapt up, his pale skin sizzling in agony. He glared defiantly at the ocean, nursing his burning feet. He had half a mind to retreat back into the structure, if only to feel somewhat secure. The dark shadow of the walls helped soothe the pain in his legs, and the smouldering soon stopped.

He closed his eyes, trying to calm down once again. The gentle washing of the waves against the beach lulled him like a soft lullaby, and he momentarily forgot his aching body. The lapping was rhythmic and somewhat comforting, sounding almost like a song. The boy could even somehow hear the words.

"We all move on

Some faster than others"

He opened his eyes.

"We all know

We all sacrifice"

He... He couldn't just *somehow* hear the words... He *did* hear them. As he concentrated, he could clearly hear a voice. He cast puzzled looks around him.

"In a bath late in the evening

Building up sorrow"

It sounded far away, and he had to concentrate really hard on the singing voice to find where it came from. Eventually, his gaze was drawn to the far end of the pebbled shore. Making sure to tread softly, although his feet made no sound anyway, the boy made his way towards the music. As he got closer, it got louder and louder, until the symphony was clearly distinct. He kept close to the walls, and stared at the figure in front of him.

The voice was soft and shaky, but strangely enchanting. The melody that accompanied it was raw, with a couple of missed notes here and there and the scratching of strings, but it simply added to the charm of the scene.

"But I can't say that I

Wasted my time

'Cause I'm built by you

And I can't say that I

Am glad it is over

'Cause that wouldn't be true"

The figure was lost in the song, swaying gently along with the tune. If he noticed the boy creeping towards him, he didn't react or break his melody to acknowledge him.

"So thank you

Oh, thank you"

The ghost took a few more steps, standing a distance behind the musician. The stranger was sitting with his back to him, facing the sea. The words he sang were plagued with a sombre longing, and yet still remained tranquil and joyous.

"We both remember

That day in the summer

When you were sat on me"

The first thing the boy noticed about the stranger was what he wore. His sunflower yellow jumper contrasted heavily with the dark pebbles underneath him, colourful and beaming like the morning sun. Short, brown locks of wavy hair were pushed around by the ocean breeze, floating gently, and the guitar he held was a dark, ebony brown. The smile on his face was wide and cheerful, his head tilted up to the sky as he sang.

"And we cried

Oh, how we cried

In that moment

We've never been so happy"

The boy took a few more steps forwards, still enchanted by the song. Keeping at a safe distance, he sat down, blinking at the musician. Next to the stranger, an animal lifted its head from the floor, and glanced in the boy's direction. The sheep bleated sharply, and the ghost flinched in fear. The man kept singing.

"But I can't say that I

Wasted my time

'Cause I'm built by you

And I can't say that I

Am glad it is over

'Cause that wouldn't be true"

His fingers flew over the strings, and the music intensified. He threw his head back, and let out a loud laugh.

"So thank you

Oh, thank you

All I can say is thank you!"

The guitar slowed down, until the notes and chords were scarce and far apart. He finished with a gentle melody, and his tone lowered to sing what the boy assumed were the final words.

"But I can't say that I

Won't miss you..."

One last strum of the instrument ended it all, and the final wisps of music were carried away by the wind.

The boy watched closely as the stranger opened his eyes, and almost yelped in fear. The man's eyes were pearly white, rimmed with a pale shade of lavender blue. He placed his guitar down on the rocks and turned to the sheep at his side, giving it a big hug. He buried his face into the woolly blue fleece, and mumbled something the boy couldn't quite catch. Every movement the stranger made seemed delayed and slow. The sheep gave the musician a gentle headbutt and made a noise. The man suddenly looked up, and stared straight at the boy.

His smile grew wider than before, his pearly gaze alight with surprise and joy. "Tommy!"

The boy stayed completely still at first, taken aback. He glanced behind him, searching for whoever the man was talking to.

"Tommy! I haven't seen you in ages!" A hand closed around his, and the boy looked up.

The musician was smiling down at him, delighted. His skin was awfully pale, and the boy could make out the rest of the building and the coastline across the way. The boy realized what the stranger was, and sucked in a breath. *You're like me...*

"You're very pale," the man told him.

I know. Everyone says that. By everyone, he meant Clay. He hadn't "talked" to anyone else, until now.

"You're very bruised too!" A hand gently cupped the boy's cheek, blue stained fingers tracing his features.

Bruised? The boy looked up at the stranger, puzzled.

The other ghost's face changed. "Oh? You haven't seen, have you?" He grabbed his wrist again, and pulled him over to the sea. The boy tried to resist, the burning pain of the water still fresh on his skin.

Seen what?

The man let go of him, and allowed him to stare into the clear water. The boy stared, and stared, and reeled backwards.

The face that stared back at him wasn't what he had expected to see. Already, he could finally tell how invisible he really was, as it took him a while to find his reflection. If he hadn't known where to look, he wouldn't have seen himself, or his current state. Red, purple and blue bruises were dotted all over his face, along with cuts that bled dry crimson blood. His eyes were pearly like the man's, with veins of red criss crossing over them. An unruly mop of golden blond hair sat atop his head, strands clumped together with red. A dull purple bruise and a couple of cuts decorated his neck like a jewelled necklace, cutting deep into his throat. Hanging low around his neck was a dark green bandana, and he was clad in a red and white shirt, tattered and stained.

The boy let out a pained, strangled gasp, and sank to his knees. The waves distorted the reflection, but he could still see enough to make him want to throw up. He gently dragged a couple of fingers over the sores, his eyes wide and fearful.

Lost in his shock, he barely paid attention to the other ghost's next words. "I told them you'd come back, but they didn't believe me!" His tone was strangely upbeat. The boy glanced over to him. The sheep had since cantered over to them, and the musician was busy fussing over its blue fleece again. "I told them: "Of course Tommy will come back! Not even death would be able to hold him!" And I was right!"

Tommy.

The boy pointed at himself with a shaking finger. It took a while for the other to notice, but when he did, his face fell a little. "What's wrong?" The answer seemed to hit him a few moments later. "Oh, right! Memory loss..." He beamed brightly again. "Don't worry about it! It happened to me too!"

Tommy... The boy pondered the name for a while. It didn't jog his memory in any way, but it felt... right.

"Do you remember me?"

Tommy gave him a small, apologetic shake of his head.

The other ghost chuckled. His laugh was high and breathy, and much like that of a small child. "That's alright! You can call me Ghostbur!" He pet the sheep at his side. "And this is Friend!"

Ghostbur? Friend? They didn't ring any bells either.

"What if we called you Phantommy?" Ghostbur suggested brightly. "And keep with the theme!"

The boy shook his head again. He didn't like it.

Ghostbur shrugged. "That's alright! I'll just call you Tommy then!"

Tommy nodded.

"You don't speak much, do you?"

No, not really.

"I remember all the times we couldn't shut you up!" He laughed. A thought suddenly seemed to come to him, and he reached for the boy's arm again. "Everyone would love to see you! They've all been so down!"

See me? Tommy looked back up at the massive black building, then down at the ghost's guitar.

Ghostbur followed his gaze, and picked up the instrument. "It's a very sad and gloomy place," he said, his tone slightly down. "And the people who go there are too. I play music to cheer them up." He strummed a few chords with his blue tipped fingers, weaving together a light melody. He looked up at the structure. "Even if they can't hear me through the walls, at least the thought is there. I'm happy when I try to make other people happy." He stilled the strings on his guitar, and the air fell silent once again.

Tommy hoped that Clay could hear the music too.

"Come on!" The boy glanced around him, and saw Ghostbur dragging a small wooden rowing boat from the shadows of the walls down to the shoreline. He didn't know how he had got there so quickly, but he didn't question it and ambled over. Friend

galloped in circles around him, bleating loudly. With one last heave, Ghostbur pushed the boat out into the water, and jumped in. Friend trotted over to the water, and with a less-than graceful leap, scrambled over the side. Grabbing the oars, Ghostbur beckoned Tommy over. "It's not far," he said. "But we can't swim the pass. We'd disintegrate before we'd get there!"

Seeing no other option, the boy made his way to the boat and got on board, taking particular care to not touch the sea water. He squinted at the horizon. A landscape stretched out across the way, surprisingly close to the island they were on. A white, sandy beach sloped up from the sea, leading to small thickets of tall green plants and trees. Smoke rose from a few buildings lining the coast, and to the left, a large, pearly white, palace-like structure sat perched on a small cliff. The boat rocked against the waves and Friend's weight, the animal's trotters rapping against the wood. Ghostbur invited Tommy to sit down, and began to row.

The crossing was smooth, despite the turbulent waters and the constantly moving sheep who cantered from side to side, peering out into the sea. Ghostbur managed to keep the boat surprisingly steady, humming gently with a broad smile slapped across his face. The guitar was slung over his shoulder, and knocked the sides of the boat every time Ghostbur dragged the oars back. Tommy in comparison remained remarkably neutral, and stared out into the ocean. Despite them getting further away from it, the isolated structure still loomed over them. It was as if they were staying still; the shadows of the walls followed them no matter what.

What did Clay call this place again? Right, the Vault, I think...

"What happened to you in there?"

Ghostbur's soft voice pulled him out of his thoughts, and he looked at him. He shrugged.

"Sam wouldn't tell me everything. Only that you died, and that it was his fault."

The boy shrugged again. He didn't know, and even if he did, how was he supposed to tell him?

"I mean... You're bruised. Maybe you fell down some stairs?" Ghostbur suggested, a strange optimism to his tone.

I don't know... Maybe.

"I don't know if there are any stairs in the Vault though. I've never been inside. What's it like in there?"

Horrible. The boy kept his eyes trained on the Vault. His mind immediately went back to the compass. Is it safe? Did it burn? If it had, he felt sorry for Clay, who had generously spent time fixing it for him.

He barely paid attention to Ghostbur's next words. "I'm assuming it can't be all bad," he said. "Sam's a good guy. I'm sure he made it comfortable."

Comfortable was definitely not the word Tommy would have used. He shrugged again. He had nothing to say.

A gentle jolt brought Tommy's attention back to the boat. They had stopped, the bow of their embarkation buried in the sand. Friend wasted no time in hopping out of it, shaking his legs and investigating a large shell pressed into the wet sand of the beach front. Ghostbur hopped out too, soon followed by Tommy. The water was much calmer on this side of the sea, as was the wind. Ghostbur dragged the rowing boat to a small crevice in the rocks, and covered it with stray tree branches lying not far from there. He pressed a finger to his lips, and grinned. "Don't tell the Badlands," he told the boy, then grabbed his hand. His grip was loose, but the pain still shot through the boy's arm. He couldn't say anything to stop it, so closed his eyes and tried to bear it as best he could.

Ghostbur's actions were far from malicious, and his excitable demeanour must have distracted him from the pain he was unknowingly inflicting. His blue sheep must have sensed something off, as he gently headbutted the boy's leg. The ghost reached down and grabbed onto the fleece, trying to channel the pain. "We could take the Prime Path," Ghostbur suggested. "Lots of people take the Prime Path!" He chuckled. "Oh Tommy! Everyone will be so happy to see you!"

Before he knew it, Tommy was being dragged up the coast, past small patches of ferns, trees and bamboo, and thrust along a straight, wooden road. It stretched as far as the eye could see, over the hilly landscape beyond and crossing over chasms and ravines.

The buildings along it were diverse and different; not a single one looked the same. Over here, a cobblestone and wooden house sat, perched on stilts over a small body of water. Over there, a white tower twisted up into the sky, topped with a golden spire. Diversity in this land appeared to be a key component, although the boy found it somewhat overwhelming at first.

Ghostbur was right, however; quite a few people seemed to be taking the Path. After only seeing one or two people at a time in the Vault, this sudden surge of beings was certainly an adjustment. Instinctively, Tommy shuffled behind Ghostbur, getting out of everyone's way. The people were as diverse and different as the buildings around them, which again was somewhat overwhelming.

Ghostbur, however, didn't seem phased in the slightest, and greeted everyone he passed with a happy wave. "Hello!" he called out brightly.

A few of the walkers were startled, and stepped back a little. A few traces of dread crossed a couple of gazes, before being replaced by kindness. They greeted him as well, either verbally or with a small gesture.

When they did, Ghostbur would point to the phantom behind him. "Look who's here!" he'd say brightly.

They would stare at Ghostbur, then at what was behind him. Puzzled, they would furrow their brow, and frown. "That's nice, Ghostbur," they'd reply with a confused look, and quickly hurry along their way.

Ghostbur would smile, and turn to Tommy. "They know you're here!" he told him.

The boy heavily doubted his claims. The confusion in their tones and the puzzlement in their eyes was something the other phantom clearly hadn't picked up on.

Tommy knew that they *looked* at him, but they didn't *see* him.

Clay was right when he said he had to look closely to notice his pale form. All these travellers didn't peer hard enough.

"I know who should see you," Ghostbur piped up. "Tubbo!"

Tubbo?

Another name he didn't recognize.

His friend prepared to drag him off again. "We should go to Snowchester," he said. "He misses you, you know?"

No, I don't.

They continued their journey. At one point, the path split off into a junction. One way continued straight on, and the other turned left, cutting through a tunnel in a small hill. The boy watched the tunnel, and was surprised to see that no one came from or continued along that part of the path. Peering over the hill, he could barely catch glimpses of a strange, black grid cutting across the sky. He wanted to ask his companion about that section of the path, but Ghostbur seemed ready to continue straight on. All of a sudden, they stopped. Tommy's eyes were still locked on the tunnel.

"Ranboo!"

The call made the phantom snap to attention. Ghostbur was waving yet another person down the path.

This one clearly stood out from all the others, not only for his tall, lanky figure, but the duality of white and black skin as well. The stranger was walking with a brisk pace, his head buried in a small leather book and mumbling something to himself. At the sudden call, he looked up. The stranger's green and red eyes widened, and his deep concentration was seemingly broken.

He stared at Ghostbur.

Then, he stared at Tommy.

Ghostbur grabbed the boy's arm. "Look who came back!" he cheered, waving it around. Friend bleated. "I told you he would! I was right!"

The figure didn't respond. He snapped the book shut, his gaze glued to the scene in front of him. Tommy felt a shiver run up his spine. This encounter wasn't like the others. The way this newcomer stared him down was different to any other encounter he had. He swallowed hard, neck burning.

He was seen.

Really seen.

And this was a reaction he had never seen before. Even Ghostbur seemed a little puzzled. "Ranboo?" he called once again.

The lanky stranger began to tremble, as violently as a leaf. His long fingers clapped to his mouth, muffling something that must have been a scream. His pointed ears darted down, his gaze still transfixed.

Ghostbur took a step forwards, towards the stranger. "Ranboo, what's wrong?"

Without a word, he turned around and ran.

Chapter Eighteen: The Little Things

Ranboo always noticed the little things in life, no matter how small and insignificant they were.

His memory was terrible, and he couldn't do much about it other than write down small passages in his memory book. So instead, he decided to scrutinize every single thing around him, relying on his eyes rather than his mind. Although ephemeral, these moments and rare details were worth far more than clumsy words on a page.

The swirling snow in the North, dancing in mesmerizing, sparkling patterns; the crops in the fields rippling in the summer's sun; the way dead leaves tumbled over the Prime Path in the autumn; the dust and imperfections scarring freshly mined diamonds. He watched the people around him too, and especially his friends. Everyone had their small, little mannerisms that no one noticed except him. Those were a few of the things that made them special in his eyes.

From the moments the feared warrior Technoblade would hum light ballades and drum his fingers when he thought no one could hear him to the way Captain Puffy's ears twitched every time a seagull shrieked from the ocean, they were like little secrets he had the honour of knowing about. He doubted whether his friends themselves knew of their actions and insignificant little ways.

All of these glimpses were brief, but treasured as long as he could remember them. And even when he'd forget them, the moment he'd witness them again with a clean slate brought him a new, childlike wonderment every time.

He had rarely found a positive use for his defective memory, until he started taking in everything around him. Until he started truly *looking*. It was a blessing, he had always thought, to be so attentive to the beauty around him that so many tended to miss.

That was until he had seen the figure behind Ghostbur.

He had looked too closely, and without even realizing it. The translucent figure was hard to see at first, but the moment he saw the reddened highlights and splatters, he was frozen to the spot. Ranboo couldn't believe what he was seeing. He didn't *want* to believe what he was seeing.

"Look who came back!" Ghostbur had cheered out loud, his voice mere background noise to the hybrid. "I told you he would! I was right!"

Look who came back.

Ranboo's entire body tensed up, before numbing completely. He could feel the blood drain from his face. His head span.

Staring back at the hybrid, "he" blinked slowly. Bruises, cuts and trickles of blood covered his entire body, so much so that he almost looked more like a failed painting than a human figure. His faded blond hair was matted and stained, and his expression was... dead. There was no other way to describe it.

Dead.

Ranboo always noticed the little things in life, but this was the first time he wished he didn't.

He backed away, his eyes still glued to the phantoms. He tried to cloud his mind with whatever he could, and block out what he was seeing. Ghostbur's callings of his name didn't register. Trying to get lost in an abyss of his own making, he continued stepping backwards, until he tripped over his own two feet. Catching himself just in time, Ranboo cast one last look towards the pale figures, and bolted.

He ran. He ran as fast as he could.

Down the Prime Path, shoving his way through the people in his way, their cries of confusion echoing behind him. His feet were on fire. One of his ankles had almost given away, but he still hobbled as fast as he could. He didn't stop. He had to get away. Far, far away.

A farmer trotted towards him, his donkey's saddlebags filled to the brim with fair, golden wheat. A mop of unruly hair of the same colour immediately filled Ranboo's mind, and he let out a strangled cry of anguish. He steered well clear of the farmer and his crops, his emotions welling up within him.

He had just started to... He was trying to...

I was trying to forget you! his mind screamed. Poisoned tears pricked the corners of his eyes, and began to burn. The world whipped past him in a blur, the Greater SMP no more than a mess of colours and sounds.

He was trying to move on with his life, and of course, Tommy had to get in the way. As always. And he had just seen him. There. Right there. Standing right in front of him. He would have said in flesh and blood, but one was much more visible and present than the other.

His eyes blinded by his rage and grief, Ranboo continued running, until he collided with something. Or rather, someone. After a cry of surprise, the hybrid felt a pair of arms wrap around him, and a soft voice whispered his name. "Ranboo? What's going on?"

"I... I..." He couldn't say anything. His whole body was shaken by sobs, and he couldn't move. The embrace he was caught in held him tightly, and reassuringly.

"Are you alright?"

"DO I LOOK LIKE I'M ALRIGHT?!?" he yelled. He shocked even himself. It was a harsh change from his usual reply; *"I'm fine. It's nothing."*

The voice of whoever was holding him still didn't register in his clouded mind. The arms tightened. "It's alright, you're safe now..."

Against his better judgement, Ranboo caved in to the hug. He breathed in deeply, hunching over and trying to get his body to cease the trembling. "I'll never be safe," he muttered, sniffing. Soft layers of rich velvet and fur tickled his skin, the softness a blissful change from the burning tears. It soothed his cheeks, like an angel's hand gently caressing his face. After a couple of minutes, he raised his gaze.

The moment he glimpsed the dark glasses, and part of the white eyes behind them, he pushed away. His hands clasped to his mouth, and he sank to his knees, bowing and begging for forgiveness. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I didn't know. I didn't realize you—"

"It's alright, Ranboo." A hand cupped his chin, and helped him up. Eret's face was graced by a gentle, warm smile.

Ranboo kept his head bowed with the deepest respect. "If I had known, I wouldn't have embarrassed you like this," he said. "I'm sorry."

The monarch lifted his chin up again. Their gazes met. Eret's tone had turned serious. "Please don't apologize," he told him. "You have done nothing wrong."

"But—"

"Ah ah, Ranboo." A finger waggled in front of his eyes. "What did I just say?" For a man who had supposedly betrayed his old nation for power and fame, he was gentle and kind. Had he changed since the revolutionary days? Ranboo hadn't been around the SMP or knew Eret that long to know.

"Yes, Your Majesty." With the back of his sleeve, Ranboo wiped the rest of his tears away as quickly as he could. The poison seeped into his skin, making him wince as it burned his flesh.

Readjusting his fine clothes – now slightly creased and bunched up – King Eret spoke again. "What happened? Why are you so upset?"

The hybrid sniffed, looking away. The image of Tommy's ghost was still vividly etched in his mind, carved deeply into his memories. He wasn't going to forget it anytime soon, and it scared him.

"Ranboo..." A gentle hand under his chin made him look up once again. Eret's brow was furrowed with an air of genuine concern. "Look at me."

He couldn't tell Eret. He couldn't tell anyone. Not yet. "I..."

"I've never seen you like this before. Talk to me."

"I can't tell you," Ranboo finally replied. "You... you wouldn't believe me... I don't even believe it myself..."

The monarch dropped his arm, and the hybrid immediately turned his eyes away, focusing on the colourful fish and clusters of coral in the lake beneath them.

The new Community House loomed over them, now rebuilt to look like less of a house and more of a junction to connect the four main branches of the primary roads. The arches were high enough for a large merchant carriages to pass underneath, loaded with goods and wares, and discs of white quartz hung high over them. The four cardinal points were carved into the stone, beautifully decorated and polished. Vines and vegetation grew between the red-brick walls, their leaves gently resting on top of the water.

"I see..." King Eret said, sighing.

Ranboo followed a red and white, wriggling eel with his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need to keep apologizing."

"I know, but..." The eel darted away, slipping in-between two bits of coral.

"But?"

"I don't think I can tell you this..."

A hand placed itself on his shoulder. "I understand," Eret said. Ranboo knew for a fact that he didn't. He didn't know the half of it. Gingerly, he looked up. The king smiled. "If you ever need to talk about it," the monarch let him know. "I'm always here and ready to listen. Just come in."

The hybrid gazed out into the distance. The Greater SMP's castle towers stretched up towards the skies, topped with vibrant flags of all colours fluttering in the breeze. "Thank you," he muttered.

"If I can help you, I will." The hand on his shoulder tugged him backwards a little. "I would get out of the way, if I was you."

"Oh." Ranboo stepped to the side as a cart slowly trundled past them. Pulled by a shaggy old horse, it was piled high with tree trunks of different sizes.

King Eret nodded to the driver, who returned the greeting with tired eyes. Their silk clothes and cloak were charred and ripped, traces of black speckling the usually so lively colours. More hooves and trundling followed the first cart, and before long, a whole queue of horse-drawn wagons were treading up to the castle, contouring the ramparts and heading towards the southern lands. All of them were piled high with timber and other building materials, from scaffolding to cobbles, and driven by sombre-looking drivers with burnt skin and clothes.

Ranboo's eyes widened. The issue on his mind was briefly replaced with questions concerning what they were seeing. "They're from Kinoko," he noted, confused. "What... What happened?"

"You haven't heard?" The monarch seemed genuinely surprised.

"Heard what?"

"Kinoko Kingdom burned down."

"What?" Ranboo's gaze flitted between the caravan and the king. "What do you mean, burned down?"

Eret's demeanour turned sombre. "A fire started last night," he explained. "And a devastating one at that. The whole mushroom valley is nothing but ashes. We could see the blaze and smell the smoke from the SMP, but when we sent a patrol to investigate, it was already too late." The mention of the fire and the failure to help in time seemed to deeply trouble the king. "They wouldn't tell me much about it, other than that they needed to gather some materials to rebuild. Although—" He leaned in closer to Ranboo. "—I think I know what they might be hiding."

"What?"

"The entire Kinoko Council came to see me at dawn to seek my help. Karl, George... Everyone was there, except for Sapnap."

Ranboo's eyes widened. "You... you think—"

"Sapnap started the fire? Yes. Now, whether it was deliberate or not, I don't know. In fact, it's a good thing I bumped into you: I need you to warn the Antarctic Commune."

"Warn them? About what?"

"If Sapnap is hiding from Kinoko, either by his own accord or that of the Council, chances are he'll seek shelter somewhere else. It's safer to let the Commune know about the potential arsonist running rogue around the factions."

"Technoblade won't listen to you—"

"Because I'm a king and he's an anarchist?" Eret chuckled. "Even so, please just try. Better safe than sorry. If he really won't listen because of my status, tell him it's a message from a concerned friend. Not from a monarch."

Ranboo was sceptical. "I don't think Techno is scared of a random fire hazard," he said. "He has other things to worry about."

"You really think he won't listen, don't you?"

"I'm doing this for your own safety," the hybrid told the monarch, perhaps a little coldly. "If Techno thinks you're trying to meddle with his affairs, he'll come for your head."

To his surprise, King Eret chuckled. "Considering his past exploits and the way he sees governments, he's coming for my head anyway," he smirked. "May as well at least protect the people in the Commune he's a part of." Pause. "Ranboo, are you alright? Really?"

The enderman hybrid hadn't realized that he had let his eyes wander again. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you sure you don't want to—"

"You know what, Your Majesty?" He sniffed, and wiped his nose as he felt another burst of tears come on. "You're right; we should warn Technoblade. I'll get onto that." He began to back away from the king, and tried to perk up a little. "In fact, I'll get onto it right now."

"Do you need me to write—"

"No, I can remember," he added in a sudden hurry. "My memory isn't that brief!" He didn't like where the conversation was circling back to, and wanted to get out of there as soon as he could. He backed towards the Community House, being careful not to fall into the lake beneath the bridge.

"Ranboo, I can tell that you're—"

"Completely fine! That's what you were going to say, right?" He had trouble containing his sobs now, his forced smile painful to hold. Luckily, at this point, he was far enough away to allow a small tear to fall. He nodded cordially. "Thank you, Your Majesty." What he was thanking him for, he didn't know. After one last glance at the monarch, he quickly ducked in-between the line of carts bound for the supposed remains of Kinoko Kingdom.

I'm completely fine. I'm completely fine.

Something about the way King Eret watched him leave made Ranboo doubt that.

His journey through the Nether was much quicker than he had expected it to be, and much less eventful. Apart from almost walking off the bridges a couple of times and speeding past the angry shrieks of a rogue ghastr, he made it to the Commune's portal with ease.

All the while, he kept casting anxious looks behind him. He didn't know what he expected to find. A herd of angry piglins? King Eret trying to give him therapy? Tommy's ghost? The latter seemed the most plausible.

The encounter still deeply troubled the hybrid, but he tried to focus on the message he had to relay. He could mourn his friend and his mental stability later.

The moment he left the fiery dimension, he stepped out into a frozen world of pure white. The snow and wind whipped around him in heavy, sparkling flurries. The Nothern lands were partial to frequent snowstorms, but very rarely were they as rough and violent as the one now.

Ranboo struggled to trudge over the frozen landscape, his feet buried deeply in the ground. His heavy fur cape fluttered in the wind, threatening to rip itself from his shoulders and fly away. Snowflakes layered his shoulders and his hair, sending uncomfortable shivers down his skin. He squinted into the distance, trying to spy any light. The storm was so violent that it hid the sun, and the world was nothing but a blank sheet of paper. Fortunately, Ranboo had walked the same route so many times. So many times, in fact, that it didn't require him to remember the way at all; it became second nature to him. Although it was long and harsh in the middle of the storm, he knew the road well.

Eventually, something shined in the distance, and the hybrid let out a small sigh of relief. Technoblade and Philza's lodgings were soon visible through the blizzard, their chimneys smoking and warm, welcoming light peeking through the cracks in their shutters. Ranboo tried to quicken his walk, heading straight for the buildings.

He kept close to the wall of Techno's home, trying to seek a minimum of shelter underneath the edges of the roof. The cellar door was completely snowed in, and the storm blew clusters of snowflakes up the stone walls. In his stable on the side of the lodge, the piglin's horse, Carl, whinnied, snug in a thick blanket and keeping to the back of his sheltered pen. Snowflakes poured onto his hay, and his water trough was frozen over.

The stairs were caked in ice, and slippery. Ranboo almost broke his neck a couple of times before he got to the door. His damaged ankle burned and ached, and he gritted his teeth. He raised his fist to knock, then hesitated.

What was he there for again?

He paused, thinking deeply. *Right. The message.* But what was it exactly? He racked his brains. Eret had offered to write it down for him. Why didn't he take up the offer? *Right, because I wanted to get away.* Tommy's battered, phantom self appeared in his mind again and he screwed his eyes shut. He concentrated on anything else other than the memory he wanted to get over and forget about.

Kinoko. Burned. Arsonist. Sapnap. Message from a friend, not a monarch. Got it.

He rapped his fist against the door, and readjusted his twisted cape. Much sooner than he had expected, the door cracked open a fraction, and Technoblade's snout poked out. The hybrid gave him a silent wave. Techno opened the door just enough to let his apprentice inside, out of the cold. "Where have you been?" he grunted as the other brushed himself off.

"Snowchester," Ranboo replied. "I stayed for the night. Michael insisted. He's scared of the dark."

The piglin snorted, and narrowed his eyes. The hybrid's explanation didn't seem to sit right with him, although if he had anything to say about it, he kept it buried in his mind. "Well, you're back now," he said gruffly. "Phil sent a message to Nikki."

"Nikki?" He was puzzled for a moment. There was no reason to drag her out to the Arctic, unless... He stopped. Nikki having to hastily come to them could only mean one thing.

The hybrid looked back up at Techno. The piglin nodded. "Impromptu meeting," he agreed, almost reading Ranboo's exact thoughts.

From his serious expression – much more serious than usual, that is – Ranboo could tell something big was up, and that before long, the subject would be impossible to change. So he quickly decided to relay Eret's message before he forgot it again. "Techno, I was crossing the Greater SMP today, and I bumped into their king."

Techno nodded, almost dismissively. "Eret hasn't been an issue," he told him.

"He asked me to relay a message," he continued. "It's about—"

He paused. A figure had caught his eye, slouching on a chair beside the fireplace. A dark, oilskin cloak was slung over the back of the seat, and a copper-coloured blade was being sharpened, glowing red in the light of the flames. He looked closer, and saw the white silk band around the stranger's head, peeking out from behind his black, coal-coloured hair. Ranboo let out a cry of surprise, drawing the stranger's attention to him. He turned around, and stared at Ranboo. His irises were ice blue, speckled with ash-grey spots.

"I found him skulking around our home," Technoblade spoke up, his ear twitching.

"I... I..." Ranboo stared at the home around them. A good deal of the inside was made of wood and flammable materials.

Sapnap smirked, appearing somewhat amused by the enderman hybrid's worry for the cabin. "Skulking isn't the right word in this situation, and you know that Techno," he chuckled. "I came to ask you for your help."

Chapter Nineteen: The Hunters & The Hunted

Purpled didn't grow up like the other children of his age.

He didn't have a loving family to wake up to in the morning, or run back to at night. Punz was family, sure, but not what he would qualify as "loving". He was more of a reluctant and harsh mentor, set on teaching his younger brother the basics in fending for himself. His strict teachings were deeply engraved in his mind.

"The world out here bows to one simple rule," Punz had told him one day. "Kill, or be killed. You don't want to be killed, Grayson."

Purpled had stopped trying to get his brother to use the name he chose for himself. Punz still insisted on calling him "Grayson".

"Purpled? What kind of name is that?"

"One I like," Purpled had replied. The conversation had happened a few years prior, when he was just over twelve years old. "I like the colour purple."

His older brother had scoffed in his face, and ruffled his dirty blonde hair, very similar to his own. "That's cute, Grayson. We'll talk about this again when you've got a proper hunter name."

If there was one thing that Purpled had learned from Punz throughout their years of training, it was to stick to what he believed in. So he kept the name. He introduced himself to others with it too. He made it his own, and if his brother didn't want to listen to him, that was his problem.

So no, his family wasn't necessarily loving, but it was the only one he had.

With his parents dying when he was a baby and leaving him and his brother to fight for themselves, he didn't know any other family than Punz and his curt and cold personality. Then again, it wasn't like they constantly had to tolerate each other's presence.

Punz was a highly sought out mercenary; as swift and deadly as lightning, and as dark and threatening as thunder. Armies and leaders from all over paid him highly in exchange for his services, however violent and bloody they were. He often told his brother that he had fought in enough wars to last him a lifetime, although the small smirk he would have plastered on his face definitely showed that he would have it no other way. He revelled in the chaos.

From the funds he got, he built himself a modestly sized castle in the Greater SMP, and bought some of the land adjacent to it. He lived the high life, but that didn't mean he turned soft. With his powerful weapons and armour, he would be able to cut down a battalion on his own with ease.

Purpled, at first, tried to follow in his older brother's footsteps. Soon enough, however, he realized that he couldn't bear to follow someone else's rules. He didn't get how Punz could find any sort of fulfilment in being constantly ordered around like a puppet. So instead, he turned to bounty hunting.

It allowed him to work on his own terms, methods and orders. He had control over every aspect of his hunting. He'd settle his own prices. If someone couldn't pay, then tough. He wouldn't work for them. When given a mission, he'd work alone, and do it his own way. But he'd get it done in a timely manner, which definitely helped him gain notoriety through the idle chatter of satisfied customers.

Unlike Punz, he didn't spend his wealth on anything but weapons and bear necessities. No one knew where he lived, and they didn't need to. If someone wanted to

seek his services, he'd find them through the grapevine. No matter how gruesome the task, he'd do it as long as he was paid. From hunting down criminals to collecting illegal wither skeleton skulls from the Nether, he'd done it all.

Punz worked in big scale wars, for dictators, kings and nations. Purpled worked on much more private affairs, for particular businesses and anonymous clients, which is what made the sudden demand for an audience from the King of the Greater SMP particularly strange to him.

He had met up with his brother at the Community House. All he received as a greeting was a cordial nod. "Where are your weapons?" Punz asked him, his voice as cold as stone.

Silently, Purple drew a fold of his cloak away, revealing his sword, multiple vials of different potions he had haggled off an alchemist, and a dagger.

His brother frowned. "Only diamond?"

"Just for now," Purpled replied. "I've left my netherite gear at home. Until I know what Eret wants to see us for."

Punz sighed. "Displaying your wealth is key to gaining respect," he reminded his brother.

Purpled didn't back down. "I'm using the element of surprise."

Punz tugged his white hood further over his head. His heavy, golden chain swung around his neck, and his pupils, glinting in the shadows of his cloak, pierced through Purpled. In contrast, his younger brother favoured clothes of darker shades of purple and black, with merely a few silver highlights. "Let's go then."

With a brisk, powerful stride, Punz marched off towards the stone castle over yonder. Behind him, Purpled kept up, his steps much lighter and quicker than his brother's.

It was in that moment that Purpled realized how truly different both he and his brother were to one another. After so long of almost deliberately avoiding each other, this was the first time he managed to get a good look at him in ages.

If his brother was the day, he was the night.

White and gold. Purple and silver.

Punz and Purpled. So similar, yet so different.

They didn't have to walk very far. Before they had even reached the ramparts, the king was already waiting for them. Punz immediately dropped down to one knee, bowing deeply. "Your Majesty."

Purpled gave the monarch a quick once-over, and a small bow of his own. It was much less reverent than his brother's, but it was the bare minimum to still stay respectful.

King Eret motioned for them to rise. "Thank you for coming," he said, giving them both a warm smile. "I'm sorry about such short notice." Not one of the two brothers replied. Out of respect, Purpled figured. The notice was indeed short, and both of them had their own things to do. Eret must have taken their silence for what it was, as he cleared his throat and continued. "I'm sure you'll want to know why I called you both here."

"We would," Purpled replied, a slight edge to his tone. If he didn't hurry, he would miss the next train for Las Nevadas, where his current target was currently operating from; a swindler who had scammed a blacksmith, and now the latter wanted revenge. He was paid a decent amount for this mission, and intended on getting it done as soon as he possibly could.

The monarch gestured to the ramparts behind him. Purple hadn't noticed what was growing over them at the time, but now he definitely did. Large, red tendrils, thorns and roots were climbing up the castle walls, cracking the stone and starting to eradicate the defences. In contrast to the light bricks, the crimson plant looked like a deep wound, bleeding out all over the castle. He wasn't surprised. The same strange growths had sprung up all over the land. The fact that it had finally spread to the Greater SMP's seat of power wasn't a shock.

Punz, Purpled noticed, also didn't say anything, and kept his eyes gaze glued to the floor.

"I hate to break it to you, Eret," Purpled told the king, deliberately forgetting to use his correct title. "But we're fighters, not gardeners." The bounty hunter grinned as he felt his older brother bristle beside him, almost taking his lack of respect for Eret as a personal insult.

On the other hand, the monarch didn't seem to take it to heart, and even let out a small chuckle. "I know you're not," he assured them. "The tendril itself can be dealt

with." From the way the palace guards were frantically hacking at the growth in question with their swords, Purpled doubted it. "I called you here for another task."

"We're listening," Punz said, his tone dry. The mercenary was always a "straight to the point" type of man, so his harsh voice didn't seem to surprise anyone.

"I want you to find who planted it there."

"Planted it? But aren't these things growing everywhere, naturally?"

"Not this one," the king corrected Purpled. "This was a deliberate attack on the monarchy."

The hunter glanced from Eret to the red tendril. Now, the guards had given up on their blades and were trying to burn it, with no success. He didn't know why the king seemed so certain about his reasoning. "What do you mean, find them?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Find them, and bring them to me. Alive."

"And you had to call both of us," Punz said. "Why?"

"Two heads are better than one," the monarch replied.

Purpled wasn't so sure about that. "This is a bounty hunting task," he said. "I can do it alone."

Eret smiled at him. "I admire your eagerness, Purpled, but I'm pretty sure Punz can bring some much needed help."

"There's of course the matter of a fair price—"

"I hear you, Punz, and I know."

"I'm certain we'd both appreciate some netherite in exchange for helping you."

From the small sigh King Eret let out, Purpled could tell that he had expected the demand. "Of course," he replied. "When you bring me the culprit, anything you want from the treasure trove is yours."

Clearly satisfied, Punz nodded. He still kept his head low to the ground, and hidden. "Do you have any leads?" he inquired.

Eret hesitated. "I have my suspicions," he admitted to them. "But they're not certain, and I don't want to blame anyone and cause problems with no proof." Pause. "You might want to check out the Badlands."

"The Badlands?"

"Something tells me that they know much more about this... Egg thing that they're letting on. Even if it wasn't them, they might be able to shed some light on who could be the culprit."

Purpled narrowed his eyes. "I'm a bounty hunter," he reminded the monarch. "Not a private investigator. I track targets through footsteps and sounds, I don't sit and question people over a nice cup of tea."

"I know, and that's why I called in Punz as well."

"You want me to do the actual investigation?" the mercenary asked. Although most of his face was hidden from view, his tone was cold. Perhaps he was even slightly insulted.

The king confirmed with a nod. "I know you're good at following orders." He smiled.

Punz did not. "Of course," he replied in a mutter.

"Purpled can handle the arrest."

At the mention of his name, the bounty hunter raised his head. He suppressed a small grin. Finally, his brother was getting a taste of what it was like being left in the shadows.

"Grayson? You want Grayson to handle the arrest?"

"Yes, I do."

Splutter. "He's just a kid!"

Purpled sucked in a breath, fury rising within him.

The monarch kept his cool. "So was Tommy. So are Tubbo and Ranboo, but look at what they've achieved." The king's smile fell a little at the mention of the blond child. Even Punz seemed a little uncomfortable. Purpled, however, stayed as passive as he

could. He didn't know Tommy that well. He only really saw him from afar, and had heard tales. His death didn't really affect him that much, except for the fact that they were about the same age. "The younger generation are incredible, aren't they?" King Eret continued. "And *Purpled* is known to be quite capable in his field. I'm sure he can manage."

For the first time in a long time, Purpled felt respected and appreciated by someone important. The emphasis on his preferred name was deliberate – to possibly shut his older brother down. He couldn't understand why someone as high and mighty as the monarch of the most powerful kingdom in the region would treat him with so much kindness and esteem. And perhaps he never would understand.

Purpled stared at the king. "Thank you, Your Majesty," he said, dipping his head.

From the kind look he was returned, the hunter knew his mark of respect was appreciated. "Bring them to me, alive."

"What if they fight back? What if they're too dangerous to come along peacefully?"

Eret hesitated. "If the worst comes to the worst..." he began, forehead creased in deep thought. "If the worst comes to the worst, kill them. But only once." His answer was spoken somewhat reluctantly. He clearly didn't want to resort to any form of violence.

Purpled could sense his discomfort, but still wanted to get details. "And what if they happen to be on one life?"

"Then they shouldn't have messed with the monarchy." The second answer, too, was spoken with an unenthusiastic undertone. His resignation and acceptance of an eventual sacrifice was pain-filled.

From the way Punz butted into their conversation a moment later, Purpled could tell he wasn't that happy with being left out. "We'll do our best," he assured Eret.

The king gave them both a respectful bow. "I know you will." After a quick, curt bow from the two brothers, Eret dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

The mercenary and the bounty hunter headed back towards the Community House junction, and the Prime Path. Craning his neck, Purpled took one last look at the red tendril.

Is it just me or has it... grown even more?

Punz stayed silent for a while, until they were out of view of the castle and its monarch. Purple hadn't realized his brother had stopped until the tension between them wasn't as heavy any more. He turned to him. "Punz?" Silence. "Look, I'm sorry if you wanted to hunt the culprit yourself. We could switch places if you really want to." *And if you compensate me with a nice, new netherite sword, he added silently.*

His brother looked up, and finally removed his hood, revealing his golden hair. Purpled stepped back, startled. His brother's eyes were a notable part of his appearance, and just like him, they were cold and piercing, and the colour of hard, sparkling diamonds.

Except now they weren't. Now they were blood red.

Purpled readied his hand around his dagger. "What... What happened to your... your eyes...?"

"Oh?" Punz dragged a hand down the side of his battle-scarred face, and shrugged. "It's nothing."

The bounty hunter looked him up and down. "Are you sure?"

"Just a splash potion gone wrong," the mercenary hummed, smiling. "Nothing to worry about."

Purpled knew better than to let his guard down so soon, but he nevertheless dropped his hand from around the weapon. "Fine."

"So, Eret's looking for a culprit?"

"Yes, he is. At least, that's what he thinks he's looking for." The younger still wasn't a hundred percent sure. "I think it's just a natural growth if you ask me."

"No no; it was definitely planted there on purpose," Punz replied.

Purpled frowned, inquisitive. "What? How can you be so sure?"

"I can feel it," the other replied, his voice nonchalant.

"You need proof."

"I'll get the proof," Punz assured him. "I'll find the proof, and the culprit. I'll send word when I have them, and you can take care of the arrest."

His grin was wide, and somewhat unsettling. Purpled didn't feel comfortable with it. "You know, I could do everything myself," he said. "If you have other things to do, I can take—"

The reply he got was strangely upbeat. "No, no. I'll do what Eret asked me to do. I could never disobey a monarch!" Perhaps he missed the feeling of finally being dragged into some sort of battle. The current political climate must have been too peaceful for him.

The bounty hunter's gaze lingered once more on his brother's eyes. "That's fine then... You know where to find me."

The other smiled. "Let's not pretend that I do," he chuckled. "But I know how to get a message to you if that's what you mean, Purpled." With one last nod, the mercenary parted ways with his younger brother.

Purpled didn't know what surprised him the most. Was it the way his brother was strangely excited about investigating instead of fighting? His rare – and possibly never seen before – happy demeanour? His eyes?

Or maybe it was the fact that Punz had finally called him Purpled.

The lanterns swayed gently overhead, casting a mellow glow over the darkened room. The stone walls were cracked, with carved pillars holding up the tons of earth above. The ceiling was low, threatening to cave in at any moment. Up on a raised platform, a strange, round table made of an unknown white rock and streaked with green glinted ominously in the dark. It was surrounded by high backed, ebony seats, four of which were currently occupied. Soft carpets silenced footsteps, chains piling onto the corners as they cascaded down from the ceiling. In the middle of the table sat a chipped plant pot in which was planted a black rose.

A withered rose. The symbol of change, and new beginnings.

The Syndicate was ready to convene.

"The meeting will begin," Zephyrus announced, and bowed his head. His black wings raised high over his seat, the damaged feathers filtering the flaming torchlight around them. "*Sic semper tyrannis.*"

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," Nemesis echoed.

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," Lethe mumbled under his breath, still shaken by the day's events. He cast a nervous look over to the fourth figure present.

Protesilaus sat at the furthest point from him. His hands were clasped, and his eyes closed. His ears twitched, as if agitated by a sound the others could not hear. His silence lasted for a few minutes, and the others waited patiently. Eventually, he slowly woke up from his trance, his expression relaxed and sullen. "*Sic semper tyrannis...*" he murmured, his voice low.

Zephyrus smiled at his friend, and sat down in his seat. "It's good to see you all again," he said. "It seems like all four of us haven't met for ages, right mate?"

Lethe realized he was being addressed, and nodded quickly. "Yeah, it's been forever."

"Well, that should be counted as a good thing, right?" Nemesis jumped in, sitting up straight. Her smile was broad, gracing her pretty face with small, soft dimples. "That means that everything is going perfectly!"

Most of Nemesis' features, Lethe had noticed over time, were quite rounded and delicate. Her large eyes sparkled in the low light, as bright and blue as the clear summer's sky, and her rose pink hair was cut short, graced with fair streaks. Her voice matched her appearance perfectly; soft and melodious, albeit a little shy at times. Her gentle and optimistic personality likened her to a ray of sunshine. Bright and warm, and a delight to be around.

Lethe missed that side of her.

Nevertheless, he nodded. Zephyrus let out a small laugh. Even Protesilaus seemed to allow himself a small smile at her comment. "If only that was the truth," he grunted, shaking his head.

Almost immediately, the bright sparkle in her eyes died down, and Nemesis sank back into her seat. "That's why you were in such a hurry to call me here," she mumbled. She pulled the dark brown trench coat she wore closer around her. It was a tattered old thing, singed in places and moth-eaten. A patch depicting the old L'Manberg flag was clumsily stitched onto the sleeve. Her expression had turned dark. "Nothing is ever here to stay, is it... Not even peace..."

Zephyrus sighed. "I wish it was," he confessed to her. He glanced from the trench coat to his damaged wings. Lethe could tell exactly what he was thinking. "I wish it was..."

"That's why the Syndicate was created," Protesilaus reminded them, standing up. His bulking figure loomed over the large meeting table, and his tusks gleamed. "Our job is to prevent these sorts of things from happening all over the place."

"I know," Nemesis huffed. "That's why I joined."

As much as Lethe liked Nemesis' presence, he couldn't help but wish she didn't choose to fight alongside them as an anarchist. The job, as Doomsday had shown, was rough and violent, and something he had never pictured her being a part of. Even the sight of her helping with the carnage that fateful day was almost unfathomable, and was a sight that a few still tried to imagine was a nightmare rather than reality.

"I called you all here because a development has come to light," Protesilaus continued.

"A development?" Nemesis inquired. "What sort of development?"

Protesilaus seemed to hesitate for a brief moment, before beckoning to a figure hidden in the shadows.

A cloaked stranger made his way forwards, until he could be seen by the whole Syndicate. He lowered his hood.

Immediately, Nemesis jumped to her feet, drawing her silver foil from her belt. Her eyes had turned murderous, and she kept the blade trained on the newcomer. "Sapnap!" she spat.

"Nikki!" The stranger's reply was much calmer, although Lethe could still detect a slight edge to it. Their tension filled the room, so much so that it almost became impossible to breathe. The underground humidity didn't help much either.

"Nemesis," Protesilaus spoke, gesturing at her to stand down. "We will not tolerate any fighting within the Syndicate."

Nemesis stayed as still as a tree trunk, unmoving.

"Nemesis." The piglin's tone was warning this time, and finally, she lowered her blade. She shoved it back into its sheath, reluctantly sitting back down in her seat.

"Thank you." With a wave of his hand, Protesilaus invited the newcomer to take a vacant seat next to Zephyrus. "I'm certain you all know who this is."

Lethe watched as Nemesis sniffed, indignant. "We've been acquainted..."

The man shot her a look, and sat up straighter.

Protesilaus continued. "Whatever your thoughts on him, he is part of our group now," he told them all. "In this room, he will be known as Herostratus." He nodded at the newest member. "Welcome to the Syndicate, my friend."

Herostratus returned the greeting, and addressed the others. "Thank you for letting me join." Lethe had never heard him speak so calmly and maturely before. "I promise I will help you in any way I can."

"Hold on, Techno—"

"Protesilaus, please."

"Protesilaus," Nemesis corrected. She stood up, and shot the newest member a glare unlike anything Lethe had ever seen her do before. "The Syndicate has no leader. Every member should have a say in what goes on within it."

"That is correct," the piglin agreed.

"Then I will be the first to say that I don't want him here!"

Zephyrus stood up. "Protesilaus is responsible for seeking out and recruiting members. If he trusts Herostratus, then we should too—"

"Zephyrus. Stop."

The winged man sat down, bringing an agitated hand up to his chin.

Protesilaus thanked him. "Thank you for standing up, but Nemesis is right; everyone has a say in what goes on here." He motioned for her to continue.

Nemesis' glare on the newcomer never wavered. "Both of us have a history together," she told them. "And a bloody one at that."

Lethe watched as Herostratus bristled. Even so, he remained silent.

Protesilaus didn't brush off his friend's argument. "So do I," he told her. "In fact, I'm certain many of us have watched Herostratus spill blood. Animal blood especially."

Herostratus sighed, and placed his arms on the table. His hands and forearms were covered by thick, shiny black gloves. "I know you don't like me, Nik– Nemesis," he said, looking back up at her. "But please; I only want you to listen to me. I will tell you all why I'm here, and if you still refuse to accept me among your ranks, I will leave."

Lethe knew that although this current version of Nemesis was harsh, she still held some form of kindness and logic within her. So when she allowed the newest member to go on and explain himself, he was far from surprised.

Herostratus paused, seemingly gathering his bearings, before starting his story. "I know you all know me as the man who kills pets and animals," he said. "And you're right, I did, once. Nemesis, I'm still incredibly sorry about the grief I caused you."

As a response, she rolled her eyes.

"But I swear, I've changed for the better. I've vowed to never raise my sword against an animal again." He glanced around him, appearing to wait for some form of approval from his peers.

Zephyrus was the first to speak on the subject. "Well, there hasn't been another war," he reminded them all. "And we all know how the smallest thing can cause one."

"Like the death of my fox?" Nemesis spoke up. "Or my bakery's chickens, or—"

"Exactly. The Pet Wars happened for a reason, and there haven't been any like them since." Protesilaus sighed, leaning back in his seat. It creaked under him, and his eyes misted over.

Lethe could almost hear the voices Protesilaus complained about so often, demanding blood and violence. His friend had fought in the Second Pet War. He wondered if the metallic tang of blood still lingered after all this time.

Herostratus nodded. "Exactly. I've changed my ways, and you all can see that." His tone lowered, and his expression turned dark. "I'm here because some still won't believe me."

"This is a personal grudge, then?" Nemesis laughed. "We don't do that here."

Protesilaus glared at her. "I laughed too at first," he told her. "But listen to him."

"Thank you." Herostratus continued. "I'm here to join the anarchists."

"Aren't you a part of Kinoko Kingdom?"

"Was," he corrected them. "I *was* a part of Kinoko. That's why I am here; I want to take it down."

Nemesis and Lethe shared a look. Clearly, they both hadn't expected that of the new member. Even Zephyrus, although clearly aware of his presence before the meeting, didn't seem to know the exact details of his visit. "Alright, mate," the winged member said, leaning forwards. Now he seemed much more invested in the other's story. "What's this about?"

"I've never drawn my blade against a single animal since the final fall L'Manberg."

Protesilaus grunted, somewhat still a little bitter. His army of trained hounds let loose on the L'Manberg army that day were all cut down almost immediately by none other than Herostratus himself, fighting with the troublesome nation instead of against them for the first time. Lethe actually remembered that particular bit of the carnage quite well. The whimpers of dying dogs were just as loud and traumatizing as the falling TNT from above.

"Really, I haven't, and all of Kinoko Kingdom knows that." He was getting a little worked up now. "Every citizen can attest to that fact. Every single one! Yet you know what they did to me? They cast me out of my home, without so much as a fair trial."

At the mention of the lack of a fair trial, Protesilaus' eyes blazed. "You were trialed without a say and condemned for a crime you didn't commit."

Herostratus crossed the rest of the Syndicate's gazes, and nodded. "Exactly. There was an animal massacre recently; frogs and horses. Tons of them, dead. I wasn't even in the area when it happened! And they still blamed me." His voice quietened. "I'm part of the Kinoko Council," he said. "And they still wouldn't let me into the meeting, not even to defend myself. They refused to listen to my side of the story." He balled up his fists, his gloves rubbing against one another. The air suddenly seemed to turn warmer, and Lethe could feel a bead of sweat roll down his black and white forehead. "So I burned it. I burned it all down."

So, he DID do it... King Eret was right in his assumptions, and not for the first time.

Herostratus gave himself a small, sad grin. "If I can't have it, no one can," he said. Those words seemed to echo someone else, someone who had also caused grief and destruction in a time long gone. Zephyrus seemed to pick up on it, and his eyes turned sad and defeated.

"So, Kinoko is gone," Nemesis spoke up. "It doesn't seem like you need our help any more."

"Kinoko isn't gone, at least not for long. They're rebuilding, possibly as we speak." Lethe didn't know why he blurted that out, but it clearly caught the Syndicate's attention.

"Rebuilding?" Herostratus narrowed his eyes.

"Lethe," Protesilaus said. "Please continue."

"Well, erm..." Now he was being directly solicited for the first time in a while, his words were caught in his throat. He couldn't talk about what he saw without remembering how he got there. Without remembering Tommy. Not only that, a few of the exact details seemed to be a little hazy in his mind. "When I spoke to Eret today, I saw members of Kinoko carrying building materials back to their land." *Or were they driving carts? I can't remember...* "Eret knew about the fire, and told me about his suspicions."

"He already suspected I was the one who caused it, right?"

"Yes, he did." He looked over to the piglin in the room. "That was the message I was meant to deliver to you. A warning about a dangerous arsonist on the run and potentially seeking shelter."

The other laughed. "Well, I mean, it's a little too late for that, Lethe," he chuckled. Even Herostratus let out an amused snort.

Zephyrus seemed ready to turn back to the main point. "So you're saying that Kinoko is rebuilding?"

"Yes."

"And that the monarch of the Greater SMP is helping them?"

Lethe didn't like the implication. From the way his friend was talking, he seemed to be shifting blame onto King Eret. "Eret is a good king," he replied. "And is very kind. I'm sure that when he was come to for help, he couldn't refuse."

"Even though the kingdom he's helping ostracized one of their own Council members for no reason whatsoever?"

"I don't think they told him the details of what happened. All he knows is that there was a devastating fire, and that distraught and tired people came to ask him for his help." He paused. "I'm sure Eret wouldn't have helped them if he knew what they had done to Herostratus," he lied.

"Lethe, what you're revealing is really important," Nemesis said, turning to him. "Write it down if you haven't already."

Protesilaus and Zephyrus agreed with a nod. "Any written traces can help us with this issue later on."

Herostratus' eyes widened, and he looked at each of them in turn. He must have realized that they were all ready to help him, and he smiled. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you all."

Write it down, right. Lethe dug his hand into the folds of his clothes. *Write it down.* He dug around a little more. *Write it down...* He switched sides, and continued searching. It was taking him much longer than it usually did to find his memory book.

The voices of the others soon faded into the background. "Kinoko, huh?" There was a creak, indicating that Protesilaus had reclined back in his chair. "Who would have thought?"

"They all seemed so nice," Nemesis sighed.

Zephyrus was the next to speak. "So did the L'Manbergians, and look what happened to their country. No government, no matter how nice and kind it might seem, is safe from corruption."

"Herostratus, what do we do about Karl?"

Silence.

"Herostratus?"

"If he gets in the way," the new member mumbled. "That's his own fault." His tone was clearly hurt, but determined. An uncomfortable silence followed his words. Clearly, the rest of the Syndicate knew of and understood the newcomer's broken heart.

"Herostratus, mate; you can stay with me. I have an extra room in the loft, with a bed right next to the chimney. It's nice and warm. I just hope you don't mind the crows waking you up in the morning."

"Thank you Phil— I mean Zephyrus." Small chuckle. "I'll remember your Syndicate names, I promise."

"Lethe? Are you alright?"

The hybrid hadn't realized that he had turned pale throughout all this. His hands were frantically patting his sides, and digging into every single pocket he knew of. "Y-yeah... I'm fine..."

That was one of the biggest lies he had ever told, and for such a usually honest person, that was saying a lot. He couldn't find his memory book anywhere. *I was holding it today... wasn't I?*

"Lethe—"

Wasn't I...?

The tall hybrid stood up, the legs of his seat brushing against the crimson carpeted floor. "I... I need to go," he muttered, his Adam's apple bobbing anxiously. He inhaled quickly, his fingers nervously tracing the strange green dents in the table. "I think I left my book at home."

Protesilaus nodded briefly. "That's alright, I think we should all head up to the surface anyway." He thumped a large, heavy hand on the table. "Meeting adjourned."

But Ranboo was already rushing down the exit tunnel.

Chapter Twenty: Lost Objects

Tommy didn't know what it was about him and picking up precious things that weren't his. It was almost a natural instinct, like he couldn't keep his bruised and bloody hands to himself. He couldn't explain it. First the compass, now a book.

The moment Ranboo ran away from them, his gaze had immediately been drawn to the small item he dropped from his grasp. It had landed face-down on the Prime Path, bending the pages and scratching the leather cover. Before anyone could trample it, Tommy had picked it up and had carried it back to where Ghostbur and Friend were standing.

Ghostbur blinked at the book. "I didn't know Ranboo was a writer!" he exclaimed, pleasantly surprised. He gently took the book from the other phantom. "I wonder what kind of stories he writes... Ooooh! I hope he writes fairy tales! Those are my favourites!" He opened it and started to read silently. The first couple of pages must have been disappointing, as he flipped to the next ones. Then the next ones. Again, and again. Ghostbur's face fell a little. "It's just a diary," he mumbled, handing it back to the boy. "And half of it is in gibberish anyway..."

Tommy took a look for himself, and could see that his friend was right. He didn't stop to read the comprehensible passages at first, but could clearly distinguish the "gibberish" Ghostbur was talking about. Strange, mysterious letters filled up pages upon pages, spidery and cramped. It hurt his empty brain just to look at it. The readable parts, however, were indeed what Ghostbur had said. They were diary entries.

Michael wanted me to take him swimming today. He said it looks so fun when others do it. How do you tell someone that water might very well kill them if they go in? I'm still new to this whole parenting business, and crushing a small child's dreams isn't something I'm used to yet. Maybe I should ask Puffy or Sam for guidance. They'd She'd know what to do.

Training with Techno went well. That's a first.

Also, does anyone know how to quickly escape from a trained warrior wielding a double-ended battle axe? I think I accidentally switched Carl's food for something else, and he doesn't look too good... Techno is NOT going to be happy with that...

They were all musings of similar content, just small events that Ranboo clearly didn't want to forget. A few names were mentioned here and there: Techno, Phil, Michael, Sam, Puffy, and Tubbo, among others. He read through a few more.

"You look pale," Ghostbur hummed, then stopped. Tommy's raised eyebrow. The look must have caught his new friend's attention, as he chuckled lightly. "I mean... Well... Maybe pale wasn't the right word, eh? Tired?"

Tired? Can ghosts even get tired? He felt fine, but Ghostbur didn't seem so sure.

"I wanted to bring you to Tubbo today, but I guess not." The phantom gestured to a point back the way they came, at the Prime Path's junction. "Do you remember your home?"

Home.

That was a word Tommy hadn't heard before. He followed Ghostbur's pointed finger to a hill, and the two, rickety oak doors within it. A dirt path branched off from the main road, cutting across a small, overgrown patch of land blanketed with soft, pastel-coloured flowers.

Ghostbur took the book from his grasp. "I'll give this back to Ranboo," he said. "You should go get some rest."

I'm not tired. Tommy pouted. Not only that, it seemed like his new friend was preparing to leave him.

Ghostbur must have felt his resentment, as he smiled even wider, reassuring. "Don't worry, I'll come back to see you! We can go and visit Tubbo together!"

Tubbo.

Tommy still didn't know who that was, but his new friend seemed awfully eager to introduce him.

"Will you be alright on your own?"

Tommy stared at him. *I think so.* He honestly didn't know.

"Friend could stay with you if you'd like!" Ghostbur offered. The sheep agreed with a small stomp of his hoof.

The other phantom shook his head. He'd be fine on his own. And anyway, the sheep with the most expressive, judgemental eyes he had ever seen wasn't necessarily what he would consider as fine company.

The doors were closed. Tommy didn't want to go through the walls. He didn't want to relieve that drowning, powerless experience that he had when leaving the Vault. So instead, he braved his aching body and pushed one of them. It was surprisingly stiff, and it took him a while to amass the strength to open it. The door swung back on its hinges, hitting the dirt wall and bringing up clouds of dust. The ghost hesitated before he entered, casting wary looks around the house.

"House" was perhaps too grand a term to describe the home dug into the hill. It was more of a strangely comfortable hole, filled with rough wooden furnishings. A couple of large chests pressed against the back wall, closed and latched shut. A few shelves were shoved haphazardly into the earth in walls, the objects perched on them balancing like skilled acrobats in the middle of a circus act. In the right-hand corner of the room, a small bed sat abandoned. The covers were kicked back, creased and seemingly untouched for ages.

Tommy took a tentative step forwards, walking along the mismatched floor made of dirt, stone and wood. Although the Vault appeared far from habitable, if this hobbit hole was his own home, he couldn't understand how he could live in such squalor. He looked back outside, ready to attempt to question Ghostbur, but he had already left, taking his sheep with him. Tommy didn't know if he had walked off, or simply disappeared into thin air.

A dull droning filled his ears, and the phantom shook his head, slightly disturbed by it. The noise was bringing the red spots back, and he didn't like it. He looked around the room.

The gentle humming drew Tommy's gaze to a particularly dark corner of the room, where a sprinkling of purple particles floated around, drawing swirls and patterns in the air. Intrigued, he moved closer. Hidden behind a rickety-looking armour stand, an odd black chest stared back at him.

It was made of a dark rock he soon identified as the same stone making up the structure of Pandora's Vault. The lid was shut and decorated with a green orb similar to a reptilian eye encrusted into the top. Tommy didn't know exactly what enticed him to touch it. Perhaps it was the myriad of purple particles escaping between the crack in the lid, or maybe it was the strange resemblance to the Vault which unfortunately, though he hated to admit it, was the only "home" he knew.

Whatever it was, it made him grab both sides of the chest and heave it open. The container clicked, releasing a breathy yawn. The purple particles spun faster, surrounding the objects below like mystical fireflies. Tommy peered down into the chest. Nestled against the obsidian sides, an array of different items lay in peaceful, undisturbed slumber. They included, among others, handfuls of colourful, sparkling stones and shards of metal, a sturdy-looking key that shone a dull, metallic black, and finally, two circular plaques.

The ghost, almost immediately, reached for one of them. For once, he didn't think himself a thief; if this was indeed his own house, then taking his own objects wasn't stealing.

The rounded item was very thin and felt somewhat fragile, even when held by the boy's weightless hands. It had a green circle in the middle with a hole poked through the centre. The rest of it was shiny, with concentric ridges circling towards the middle. Tommy briefly glimpsed his battered complexion in the smooth centre, and gagged.

No wonder Ranboo chose to run.

He picked up the other disc. The second was very similar to the first, although this centre was purple and white. The boy turned it over.

On the other side, there was an inscription scrawled around the edge of the hole.

Mellohi

He looked at the first disc.

Cat

Cat and Mellohi. Something clicked. These weren't normal disks: they were music discs. How did he know that?

I don't know.

Why was he so certain?

I don't know.

Did he know what to do with them?

Yes.

Yes, he did.

He walked back outside, under the bright rays of the golden sun. The shiny discs caught the light, darting shimmering circles over the grass and flowers. Originally, the boy thought that the flowers were natural, but by looking closer, he could clearly see that they were tied into bunches, and left there. A few had already started to wilt. He suddenly felt queasy, realizing why they were there.

The music discs started to weigh in his grasp, and he continued walking. Stepping onto the Prime Path, he looked left and right. All the people he had crossed earlier seemed to have vanished, and the road was deserted. The morning traffic had finished, and wouldn't resume until a little later that afternoon. Tommy crossed the wooden path, heading towards the edge of the plateau. He didn't even realize he was on one until he started heading down a slight slope. The grassy edge suddenly turned into a rocky drop, plummeting into a curved valley filled with clusters of bamboo and a small stream. In the distance, a couple of towers stretched up into the sky.

It wasn't far at all from his supposed home.

Tommy continued on, stopping suddenly when he reached an oak tree. Its branches trembled in the light breeze, and the phantom basked for a moment in its great shadow. He stared in front of him, at the bench and the wooden box beside it.

It was a strange device; the box had multiple small holes poked into each side, and a turntable on the top, complete with a long armed needle and a switch on the side. Tommy blinked at it for a moment, then, like clockwork, approached it and hooked up one of the music discs. How did he know how to operate the device? Again, a lot of what he was currently doing was a mystery to him, if he thought about it too much.

He set Cat on top of the turntable, making sure the middle hole was lined up with the small ridge, then moved the needle onto the ridges. With shaking fingers, he flipped the small switch. Gears inside the box began to churn and grind, and the turntable started to spin. The needle scratched the ridges for a couple of seconds, before music finally began to spill out from the holes in the device.

Tommy stood back. He didn't expect... He never thought...

Am I remembering?

Cat's music was somewhat heavy, and a little out of tune, like an abandoned harp left to rot in the middle of a forest. It was a strange image to be sure, but one that ultimately fit the disc.

Tommy stared at the turntable, and slowly sat down on the bench. Hypnotized by the gentle spinning and notes, it took him a while to finally drag his eyes away. He felt his ears twitch, enchanted by the music disc's contents. He closed his eyes. Things began to pour back into his mind. It was as if the floodgates had been opened ever so slightly, allowing a few memories to trickle back into his brain.

The music discs.

His home.

His appearance.

And...

He didn't know how long he stayed there, basking in the repeated tune of the music. He allowed small snippets to slowly fill his mind. There was nothing big, however; merely a few small details that seemed insignificant and unimportant, such as the time an apple fell from a tree and hit him on his head, followed by hysterical laughter coming from a faceless figure he couldn't quite yet remember.

So no, he didn't know how long he was there. It could have been minutes. It could have been hours. All he knew was that at some point, the music had stopped.

Tommy opened his eyes. When he was sure silence had filled the air, he looked over at the jukebox (he remembered the device's name now). Everything had stopped; the turntable, the needle, everything.

"What...?" The voice was strained and shaky, plagued with a dread the boy couldn't quite place. He looked up, and jumped back, startled.

An armoured figure stood over the jukebox, green and black eyes wide and shocked. The silver trident in his hand dropped to the ground, and his hands started to reach out, trembling. Tommy held his breath. Had he been seen, yet again?

But the stranger – that he now recognized as the figure from the Vault at closer inspection – had his gaze fixed on the device. His gloved hands gently picked up the

music disc, inhaling sharply. Cat shone in the sunlight, reflecting along with the golden armour. The stranger's forehead was creased, his eyes veiled with confusion.

When he spied the second disc, Mellohi, lying down on the bench, he grabbed that one too. Tommy ducked out of the way. Clearly, he hadn't been seen. Whether it was a relief or not, he couldn't say.

Watching the Golden Guard (after a while of debate, that's what he decided to call this stranger) stare at the discs as if they were going to come to life and bite his hands off, guilt began to pool in the phantoms non-existent stomach.

This was the man he had taken that compass from, and had still not given it back to. He wondered if the discs were his or not. His memories seemed to say otherwise, but then again, was his mind really one to trust at this point? The stranger stared at Cat and Mellohi for a good while. Physically, he was imposing, with his armour, weapons, gas mask and height, but now, with the two discs in his hands, he looked as fragile and frightened as a small animal caught in a bright light.

All of a sudden, the Golden Guard turned around, picked up his trident, and rushed back towards Tommy's home, the discs still in hand. The phantom didn't follow him, and instead watched from afar. A few minutes later, the stranger emerged back onto the Prime Path, heading towards the coastline with a decided step and shaking his head. What he seemed to be muttering to himself, the boy couldn't quite catch.

The ghost followed the Golden Guard until he disappeared from view. Something suddenly slipped out from Tommy's mouth, setting his throat ablaze. It was short, but hurt like a knife cutting into him.

"Sam."

If the nations were a family, then the Badlands would be the middle child. Often overlooked in favour of everyone else concentrating on the feuds between the older siblings and the younger ones, the faction used to quietly prosper and grow in its own corner of the land. That was before the fall of L'Manberg.

Now, the Badlands were finally getting the recognition they deserved. Like L'Manberg, the Badlands had rebelled against the Greater SMP in favour of their own independence. However, the leaders worked much more diplomatically than with warfare, and although King Eret denied their recognition time and time again, they

quietly accepted the refusal, and kept to themselves. With L'Manberg gone, they had finally started to gain notoriety, and the courage to continue pestering the king for territory.

What some had always believed to simply be another, copycat nation to tolerate and accept actually began to prove itself different from the others, and highly useful. Headed by an oligarchy of three members, their effects had started to show on their nation and the people within it.

One of them was a demon warrior and hunter. Skilled with the bow, the blade and the intricate art of potion fighting, his training had rubbed off on his people. Although perhaps the Badlands' army wasn't as large and disciplined as the Greater SMP's, they could easily match their strength, and sometimes even surpass it.

Another of the leaders was a redstone Grand Master. He had left the lands and studied for a long time, before returning and putting his skills to good use. Before long, the Badlands had started to build and train their own engineers, creating a small, mechanical empire to call their own. The mines in particular strongly benefited from these advances.

The last of the three leaders was perhaps not one that would have been expected to head a faction; he was a naturalist, a scholar. He too was trained in the arts of war, but ultimately seemed to devote himself to the land itself, and the ecosystems around it. His influence was strong, to many people's surprise, and soon enough, the forests lining the south-west borders were protected under strict clauses, and agriculture was simple and effective, with little to no negative impact on the world around them.

The Badlands were growing and prospering faster than ever, and as Ghostbur ambled through their territory, he smiled. He always did, but especially now he was in the Badlands.

Despite the somewhat threatening name, it was a glorious territory; plains and moorland stretched out for ages and ages. The forested borders swayed gently in the wind, and the waves roared along the coastline. In the distance, the large white mansion – the seat of the Badland's power – glittered in the sun like a polished jewel. The flat ground seemed to stretch out for ages and ages, speckled with small villages, settlements and businesses further away. A large construction site loomed near the eastern border, well under way. The first bank in the region seemed to be coming along nicely.

That being said, many knew that most of what was considered the Badlands wasn't exactly the faction's own territory. The three leaders had tried to haggle the coastline off King Eret for ages. As far as everyone knew, the monarch kept refusing, so much so that the Badlands had decided to build and thrive there anyway.

Ghostbur headed towards the coast, seated on Friend's back. He held no mass of any sort, and therefore wasn't a burden to his sheep. His hands were laced in the blue fleece, and Ranboo's lost book was perched between his bowed legs. His blue stained guitar was still slung over his shoulder, bouncing up and down with the trotting rhythm.

As he got closer to the sea, he closed his eyes, and listened carefully. To his surprise, he couldn't hear what he hoped to hear. Opening his eyes, he looked up at the small building they were approaching. Made of the dark stone bricks and usually brimming with dusty workers, the mine was strangely silent. Gone were the sounds of pickaxes splitting the stone. Gone were the chugging and clicking of the redstone contraptions that helped the miners out. Gone were the rolling and tinkling of copper and tin, and the roaring of the furnaces. All that was left was silence.

Ghostbur peered through one of the windows. All he saw was red. Tendrils and shoots covered every surface, from the blast furnaces to the elevator leading down the mineshaft. Orange spores and strange glowing pollen danced around with the dust and stone residue.

He frowned, and turned to Friend. "Well, never mind," he said out loud, watching as the sheep cautiously sniffed one of the smaller tendrils crawling out from under the door. With a small tug on the blue fleece, he guided them both back the way they came. "I'm sure it'll be working again in no time!"

Ghostbur liked the mines. They were loud, they were noisy, they were dusty and most likely smelled of sweat and stifling humidity, but he liked them for that.

The sparkling ores that were brought up were enchanting to him, and since he was mostly there to watch and not interfere with the work, the miners were kind and welcoming. The machines as well fascinated him, from the advanced smelters to the quick descents into the earth aboard a state-of-the-art lift. Ghostbur knew he could have tried to visit the other mines, further along the coast and perched on the higher cliffs, but he somehow guessed that they were in the same state as the one here. Overgrown, and shut down. Progress in the Badlands' mining industry had slowed to a halt.

"You must be happy," the phantom whispered down in Friend's ear. "I know you don't particularly like the noise."

In response, the sheep shook his head. If anything, the red tendrils were what seemed to disturb him the most.

They continued towards the much more deserted and wild side of the Badlands, trotting briskly over the stones and dusty ground. They stopped only to pick a bouquet of heather. Ghostbur's fingers were light and delicate, softly picking the stems with no intention to hurt the bush. His sheep wandered a few feet away to munch on a small patch of dry grass.

Once his bouquet was finished, Ghostbur carefully put it in between the strings of his guitar. The heather smelled sweet, Ghostbur liked to think. He couldn't really know for certain. Phantoms can't smell, and sometimes that was a good thing.

"You know, Friend," Ghostbur began, watching his companion graze. He fumbled with the lost journal. "It's weird that Ranboo would just leave this behind. He's always so organized."

As a reply, Friend raised his head ever so slightly.

The phantom started to turn the pages again. "It's very strange if you ask me..." He raised his eyes, and gazed out across the plains. In the distance, a herd of what looked like deer were prancing across the horizon, and the ghost was immediately enchanted. "Friend! Look over there!"

He stood up, hugging the book close to him as he watched the magnificent creatures. The herd was headed by a big stag, with imposing antlers. The way they jumped slightly out of sync reminded him of the ocean waves, and his eyes devoured every second of the scene. Behind the herd, two black horses galloped across the landscape, carrying two figures on their backs. The dark steeds stood out in contrast to the lighter coloured deer and moor, and swooped into the herd from time to time like two deadly shadows. Before long, the riders and the deer parted ways, and they both changed direction. The herd of deer continued to head forwards, while the horses turned.

And they were heading right for Ghostbur and his sheep.

Just as they were about to collide, the horses reared, stopping just in time. Friend bleated in sudden fear, and quickly ducked behind Ghostbur.

The phantom raised his arms over his face, bracing for impact. When it never came, he dropped them, and peered up at the riders. The sun framed their silhouettes in a golden glare, and he blinked a couple of times to adjust to it. Even though he still couldn't make out who was there, he still put on a bright smile, and waved. "Hello there!"

"Ghostbur," one of the horsemen exclaimed before dismounting his big, black stallion. "We almost didn't see you there!"

"That's alright!" the ghost grinned. "I can't die a second time! How are you, Your Grace?"

The Red Duke let out an amused chuckle, and removed his riding gloves. "You know these ridiculous titles and formalities don't apply to you, Ghostbur," Bad hummed.

Ghostbur tilted his head, puzzled. "Why not?" He liked calling him the Duke. It gave their interactions a sense of strange importance and honour.

"You're a friend." The demon smiled warmly.

The other beamed brightly. "That's good to know," he said. "I like you a lot too. I like everyone, actually!"

At the exclamation, Bad let out a small chuckle. "You're a good one, Ghostbur. If more people were like you, maybe peace would be here to stay..."

"Well..." He ignored the flashes of painful memories. The phantom was good at blocking out what he didn't want to witness again. "Not everything is lost, right?"

Bad's face faltered a little, and Ghostbur suddenly worried. He hated making other people sad. The demon's white eyes were rimmed with red, and the ghost wondered if he was getting enough sleep. Or maybe he was sick. "You're a kind soul."

"I try my best." And that was true, he really did. He quickly dug a hand into his pocket, and withdrew a lumpy, soggy mass of what looked like crushed lapis-lazuli rock. He pressed it into the Duke's hands. "Here, have some blue!"

Bad's gaze lingered on the gift, a small smile gracing his blackened face. "Just keep being yourself, Ghostbur," he told him. He put the blue in his pocket, and brushed the remnants off his fingers. "Keep being yourself and ignore the chaotic world around you. That's my advice."

"Oh, I could never do that!" Ghostbur tutted, shaking his head. He wiped his hands on his yellow jumper, smearing the blue dye all over it. "I have all my friends to worry about!"

"That's true... What are you doing in the Badlands?"

"I wanted to visit the mines," the phantom told him. "But it looks like they're all closed."

Bad cast a vague look down the coastline. "Yes, it's unfortunate..."

Ghostbur took this chance meeting as an opportunity to ask a couple of questions. "Have you seen Ranboo anywhere?"

"Ranboo?" Bad looked up at his companion, still seated on their horse. "I don't believe we have, no."

"Oh... That's alright!"

"Why are you asking?"

Ghostbur waved the book in front of them. "He dropped this, and I wanted to give it back!"

Bad stared at the small journal, his expression indecipherable. "What is it?" he asked.

The ghost started to flip through the pages. "Well, at first I thought he was writing stories," he told the demon. "But turns out, it's just a diary or something."

"A diary?" Bad's interest seemed to have peaked.

The phantom didn't pay any mind to it. "Yes, a diary."

"And he dropped it?"

"Yes."

Bad held out his hand. "May I have a look?"

With a quick nod and trustworthy smile, Ghostbur handed it to him. The Duke's clawed hands dug into the leather cover as he himself began to look through it. He

turned the parchment pages ever so gently, with a softness one would have never really expected from a devilish looking, horned creature such as him. That's what the ghost liked about the Red Duke; his personality and mannerisms subverted everyone's expectations.

"Half of this is unreadable," Bad pointed out.

"Hold on!" another voice suddenly chimed in. There was a thump as the second rider dismounted, and approached them both. His velvet paws took the journal from Bad, and he too started to read a couple of passages to himself. "This is in Ender."

"Ender?" Ghostbur questioned.

"Ant, are you sure?" Bad asked his friend.

Antfrost nodded, his tail swishing under his dark cloak. "I'm a naturalist. I've learned to study these sorts of languages."

"Is that what the ender-folk speak?"

The Marquis turned to Ghostbur, his red eyes alight with an eagerness the phantom didn't expect. It must have been a long time since anyone had asked him a question of that sort, and he was excited to finally be able to answer. He purred lightly, his passion for the subject clearly showing. "Not technically," he said. "It's a much more commonly written language than a spoken one. In fact, it shouldn't be really called a language; it's more of a coded cipher."

"A cipher?"

"A cipher," Ant confirmed with a smile. "Each symbol represents a letter."

"Like a spy's code?" Ghostbur asked, his eyes wide. Like a small child, he was excited and curious. The Marquis seemed to like it.

"Exactly like a spy's code," he purred, his whiskers twitching.

"Why would it be written in code?" Bad asked his friend.

Antfrost shrugged. "I can't say, but then again, what do people usually use codes for?"

"I know!" As eager as a pupil, Ghostbur raised his hand. Seemingly playing along, Ant gave him permission to answer. "To hide something or keep it private!" Almost as soon as he said that, he faltered. "Oh... Maybe we shouldn't have opened it..."

After a moment of intense thought, Bad took the journal back. "You know, now that you mention it, Ghostbur," he began. "I think we saw Ranboo on our borders."

"Really?" The phantom made a move to take the book. "I'll go give it to him!"

To his surprise, the demon held the book out of his reach. "We can take care of it for you."

The ghost dropped his hand. "But I needed to talk to him about something as well."

"I think it's best if you leave us to deal with it," the Duke continued. "It's dangerous over there. Have you seen the crimson spreading?"

Ghostbur had, but didn't understand why it was a danger. It was ugly, yes, but nothing a little pruning couldn't put right. "I have, but I'm not scared!"

"You should be! Who knows what those tendrils could do to a kind little ghost such as yourself? We're scared for your safety, you little muffin!" Bad smiled, reaching out to ruffle the phantom's hair. Ghostbur arched towards the touch like a sunflower, only to have the demon pull away. "Imagine the trouble the Badlands would get into if something happened to you!"

He was worried for both his nation and the little ghost; Ghostbur respected that. He respected the loyalty and the concern, so much so that he nodded. "Alright then!" he beamed.

Antfrost's rumbling purr rang in his ears, as did Bad's little chuckle as they parted ways soon after. The horses reared once again, brutally tossing their heads and before long, their thundering of hooves faded into the distance.

With no mission at hand any more and no mines to gawk at, Ghostbur decided to head back to the Vault. The guitar on his back was itching to be played, and Friend seemed ready for a nice long nap, lulled by the ocean waves and the phantom's songs. He also wanted to think up a few more melodies and ditties, now that Tommy would be around to hear them. He seemed a little lost, and Ghostbur wanted to make him happy again.

Tommy liked music. His music discs were some of the most important things in the world to him. *Were*. Ghostbur didn't know if they still were. He didn't even know if Tommy would remember them. He didn't seem to remember much.

Ghostbur seemed to know more than him, although he definitely wasn't ready to let Tommy know. Ghostbur was naive, yes. Childish? Absolutely! But he wasn't stupid.

He had a good idea where the bruises had come from. It didn't take a genius to find that out. Even if Sam refused to reveal the details of Tommy's death, it was somewhat obvious from what he had seen.

Just as he was about to drag the small rowing boat down to the shore, Ghostbur stopped. Friend also paused, nudging him curiously. He turned to Pandora's Vault. It loomed over the sea, tall, rigid and cold. The ghost swallowed hard, fumbling to dig his fingers into his sheep's blue fleece. The colour and feeling was comforting to him, and he closed his eyes.

He inhaled, and began to count.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten...

He breathed out.

He liked to make people happy. He really did. But did Tommy's murderer really deserve happiness? Did Dream deserve to hear Ghostbur's songs? The answer he immediately went with was no. He was a bad man, and deserved the stifling silence and coldness of both his cell and his peers. Then again, by that same logic, Ghostbur wouldn't be deserving of anything good.

He'd always introduce himself as Ghostbur to new people. Never as Wilbur Soot.

For a long while, he didn't know anything about his past. He was just a joyful, musical ghost with an obsession with blue and sheep. Everyone loved him, and he loved everyone. When he was told what he had supposedly done, he didn't want to believe it. He refused to accept it, and when he eventually did, he refused to be associated with what he used to be. As far as he was concerned, he had always been Ghostbur.

He had never blown up L'Manberg.

He had never died to his father's own blade.

He had never abandoned his own son, Fundy.

He had never betrayed anyone.

He was never Wilbur Soot.

So actually, yes. Yes, *Ghostbur* was deserving of happiness. Wilbur was not, and neither was Dream. That seemed to cement his decision. He wouldn't sing for the prisoner. Not any more. But then again, Dream wasn't the only one shackled to the Vault.

Eventually, Ghostbur decided to drag the boat back to the shore, and hop aboard. If he wasn't going to sing for the prisoner, he'd sing for the Warden. That thought alone was enough to make him regain his spirits.

Chapter Twenty-One: Haunting

By the time Ranboo had finished his search, his shack looked like a hurricane had ripped through it. His bed was tipped over, the covers and pillow torn apart and scattered around the room. His small writing desk lay in shambles against the back wall, only one leg out of the four intact, and the inkwell was smashed and had splattered its contents up his leg. Everything in his storage chest was thrown about or broken, and he had even pulled up some of the floorboards in a final act of desperation.

Now, with his home ransacked and his arms aching, he collapsed in the middle of the carnage. He was at a loss. He didn't know what to do. His memory book was gone.

His black cat, Enderchest, had stayed on the windowsill throughout her master's folly, and had only ventured out when he was done. The feline was a comfort, sure, but not what he wanted at that moment.

Did he take his journal out with him that day? Did he leave it at Snowchester? When was the last time he even came back to his shack?

With so many questions buzzing around in his mind, Ranboo's next actions were done in almost a daze. He left his home as it was, and went to his friends. Phil and Nikki were feeding the crows that gathered over the cabins, and greeted him as he passed, inquiring about his notes. The hybrid didn't answer them. He ran straight to Technoblade, who was busy giving Sapnap a brief tour of their small snowy settlement.

Ranboo met up with them outside the kennels, and pleaded with the piglin to borrow his horse.

Techno was understandably reluctant to let his beloved stallion out of his sight, especially ridden by someone not very experienced in the field, but when he saw his protégée's desperation, he agreed.

"If anything happens to him though," the warrior warned with a grunt. "You'll pay the price."

Perhaps it sounded selfish, but Ranboo didn't care about Carl's safety. He only wanted to find his memory book. In a matter of minutes, the homely cabins of the Antarctic Commune were growing smaller and smaller as the enderman hybrid rode away. Carl was a strong horse. Purely bred from the best of the best, he had a silky, light brown coat speckled with darker spots, incredible stamina, and speed unlike anything Ranboo had ever ridden before. He understood why Techno was so protective of him. It wasn't the best idea to ride Carl through the Nether, especially at a gallop, but Ranboo wasn't thinking straight, and wasted no time in rushing along the thin bridges of the hell scape, jumping through fire and veering around falling lava.

Before long, he had reached the Greater SMP's Nether portal, and leapt through it. He didn't even wait for the nausea to settle down, and kicked the stallion into another run. He guided him down the Prime Path, oblivious to the people he very nearly crushed under the horse's hooves. He didn't like taking the smaller streets and passages when he crossed this part of the territory; his memory was so frail that he would get lost easily. The large, wooden road was the most obvious path, and one he would always take. If the book had dropped somewhere along there, he'd see it. He slowed Carl ever so slightly, just so that he would have the time to inspect the edges of the road. His emerald and ruby gaze darted from left to right, scrutinizing every single nook at cranny. Nothing.

When he got to the junction splitting the main path towards what remained of L'Manberg, he stopped for a moment. Tommy's home stared back at him, doors open and beckoning. After a painful flash of the ghost's battered body, Ranboo cleared his thoughts. He would worry about the phantom of his friend later.

With still no sign of the journal, the hybrid continued further along the Prime Path. It dipped down, heading towards the coastline. Carl's hooves thundered along the wood, his mane whipping around Ranboo's clenched hands. The reins began to slip, slick with nervous sweat, but he still grasped them tightly.

The warmer air of the SMP was soon replaced by the decidedly cooler, saltier air of the Badlands. Pandora's Vault grew bigger and bigger, like a shadowy monster sleeping just off the coast. Once much nearer to the beaches, the prison blocked out the sun almost entirely. Ranboo had no idea if he had passed this way, but he still looked. He was paying so much attention to the crevices in the rocks and the driftwood that he was no longer taking note of his ride.

Carl had stamina and speed, yes, but he wasn't a fantastical creature of any sort. He didn't have any magic powers, or morphing abilities. He was a horse like any other. He was an animal with feelings, a brain, and above all, a temper. Having had enough of being pushed into an almost constant sprint ever since he was taken out of his stable, Carl let out an angry snort, and threw his head back. Startled, Ranboo yelped and tried to hold on. His steed reared, trying to shake off his rider. The hybrid's hands slipped, and he lost control.

His back hit the sand, hard. His breath was knocked out of him, and his head spun for a couple of minutes. The whinnies of the frustrated stallion rang in his ears, and he barely paid attention to the sharp cry and the sound of footsteps rushing towards the scene. The ground shook under the hybrid as Carl's hooves stomped dangerously close to his shaken, defenseless body. There was more shouting, and before long, the stomping stopped. The cries as well, replaced by the lapping of the waves and the occasional snort from the stallion.

"Are you alright?" A gloved hand reached out to Ranboo, helping him up.

The hybrid took the help and was hauled to his feet. He brushed himself down, his head still ringing from the fall. His entire body ached, and he groaned. When his eyes finally focused, he saw his saviour.

"Thank you," he breathed, gulping.

Handing the reins of the now decidedly calmer and more controlled steed back to him, Sam lowered his mask. He gave the hybrid a smile. "Don't mention it," he said, watching as Ranboo tied the reins to a piece of wood, allowing Carl to wander off just far enough to reach a patch of grass and start grazing.

Ranboo turned back to Sam. He may not have the best recollection, but he knew for a fact that their last interaction was far from smooth and friendly. And that it was the hybrid's own fault.

"Are you hurt?" Sam said.

"N-No... I'm... I'm fine..." He quickly checked if everything was in the right place. "At least, I think I am..." Physically, yes, he was fine. Mentally, he could be so much better.

"That's a relief," the warden sighed. "I saw your horse go crazy, and panicked."

"It's not my horse," Ranboo quickly said. "It's Techno's."

"Ah." Sam's tone was amused. "Yes, that makes much more sense now."

Ranboo didn't want to laugh. He didn't want to have a light-hearted conversation. He just... He wanted to get on with his mission. But first, he had to deal with Sam. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry for..." He didn't really know. He couldn't remember. Unless... *Puffy. Right.* "I'm sorry for that, y'know... with Puffy."

He tried to be as vague as possible, and hoped that Sam understood and wouldn't probe him further. Fortunately, from the response he got, Sam did. He smiled. "Ranboo, it's alright," he assured him. "We should be the ones to apologize to you. We were in the wrong."

The hybrid didn't know how to respond. He couldn't confirm or deny the warden's claim, and so settled for a simple; "Oh."

"You wanted to protect Michel, I understand."

Michael. Finally, he understood which situation it was, and the guilt gnawed at him. "No, I should have listened. You were only trying to raise and help a kid." He hesitated. "I could talk to Tubbo about taking—"

Sam cut him off. "There's no need now. Puffy is doing a wonderful job." He seemed to linger on his next sentence. "She's the best parent the little one could ask for."

The slight tremor in his voice didn't escape Ranboo, and he quickly tried to reassure him. As much as his memory book was important to him, he couldn't leave his friend the way he was. "Were you involved?" From the look he was given, the hybrid realized with horror that he had phrased what he wanted to say very badly, and spluttered. "NO! I don't mean like that, I mean... I... CRAP! Sorry, I..."

To his surprise, Sam laughed loudly. "You should see your face," he chuckled. "It's priceless. If by "involved" you mean I saved both of them from a horde of piglins, then yes. Any other implication is a harsh no."

Ranboo was relieved that he wasn't about to be slaughtered where he stood. "Alright... Well..."

"You seemed... tense, when we came to see you."

"Was I? I don't remember..."

"Was something troubling you?"

Ranboo shrugged. "No. Yes. Maybe." He sighed. "I don't know." He made a move to collect – a now rested – Carl, and leave.

"Wait, Ranboo."

The tone was slightly commanding, and made him stop in his tracks. The hybrid looked around. "Sam?"

"Do you know where Tommy kept his discs?"

The question was abrupt, and took Ranboo aback. "I..." Tommy's bruises clouded his mind. He couldn't even pay attention to the question.

Sam must have realized that he had struck a sensitive spot, as he immediately backed down. "I'm sorry, it's alright if you don't know—"

"No, no... I do..." He thought he did. "His enderchest, I'm pretty sure." Sam froze, and Ranboo noticed. "Sam?" Silence. "Is everything alright?" Silence. "Sam—"

"Are you certain, Ranboo?"

"I..."

"Are you certain?"

The hybrid had to jump in. "You know my memory is useless," he said. "But that would make the most sense. You know how precious they were to him."

"I do," he replied, almost in a daze. "I do..."

"Did something happen?" he asked.

Sam was quick to brush it off. "Nothing." He inhaled deeply, and turned his gaze up to the sky. A flock of seagulls swooped above them, screeching at the top of their lungs. "I just... I think I need to start to move on."

Ranboo was taken aback. Out of all the people to move on from Tommy's death, he had expected Sam to be one of the last. "What?"

"My mind... It's not normal. I'm seeing things, and hearing things, feeling things, and... I feel like he's haunting me." Pause. "I don't know if I can trust myself any more."

"I know the feeling," Ranboo replied, his own body and brain still very much strangers to him.

Sam breathed out. "I just need to get myself back on track, that's all."

Ranboo wondered if that really was all it took to move on. He knew for a fact that Sam was not losing his mind. Tommy probably was haunting him, indirectly or not. That, or they were both going insane. At the moment, the hybrid reluctantly realized now was not the time to talk to the warden about Tommy's ghost.

"You look shaken, is everything alright?"

"Hm?" Ranboo didn't realize he had retreated into his fleeting memories and images until Sam dragged him out of them. "I'm fine."

From the look he was returned, the hybrid knew for a fact that the warden didn't believe him. At least not entirely. "You know I'm always here for you, right?"

"I know."

"And if you need to talk about anything, I'm ready to listen."

"I know."

"I know that you know, Ranboo, but I'm just reminding you."

Ranboo appreciated Sam's willingness to help him, he really did. But there was... something that stopped him from accepting it. Techno and Phil were the right sort of protective, but much more like friends. They were there for him, but not always ready to

listen to his problems or help him out. Sometimes, they seemed to take some of his musings as jokes, laughing them off before continuing with whatever they were doing.

Sam on the other hand...

He seemed too caring, too willing and too honest. He would genuinely worry about Ranboo and his well-being every time they interacted, and it made the hybrid somewhat uncomfortable. Sam was too genuine, and too much like a parent than a mostly laid-back friend. Ranboo found himself wondering if Tommy ever thought the same things about the warden. He forced out a smile. "I'll keep it in mind," he said. "As long as I can remember it."

"How about you write it down then?" Sam suggested, earning him a sudden shift in the already strange tension between them.

Ranboo's mind immediately got back on track. "I don't have my memory book," he confessed. "I lost it."

The warden immediately frowned. "You lost it?" he repeated, almost asking for confirmation.

Ranboo agreed, reluctantly. "Yeah, I sort of did... Have you seen it?" He started to gesture. "It's quite small, with a brown leather cover, and a few stains in the corners." He racked his problematic brain, trying to find what other telling details he could think of. "On the first page, there's a blotchy drawing of a bee Tubbo did."

Sam thought for a moment or two, his arms crossed. The gentle ocean breeze lifted up the hem of his dark green cloak, and his golden armour glittered. Ranboo's eyes were transfixed by the dark metallic reflections here and there, most likely due to the bits of netherite smelted into it. "I don't think I've seen one lying around," he replied, much to the hybrid's dismay. "Was there anything important in it?"

Ranboo hesitated before answering with the same reply he used here and there when someone would be a little too nosy about the contents of his journal. "Just a couple of mundane entries," he lied. "Nothing too special, but I still keep it around just in case something does happen that's worth remembering and writing down."

"Well," Sam said. "I think that you've witnessed a lot of events that were worth writing down, right?"

The hybrid bristled. "I think I'd quite honestly want to forget many of those events..." he mumbled.

Sigh. "We all do."

He figured after a moment of thought that Sam and him had quite a few common memories that they'd rather forget. But for the first time, fortunately, Ranboo had the advantage to do so, although the accumulation of trauma was one of the few rare things that stayed etched into his brain. That said, he still wasn't any closer to finding his memory book. The hybrid snook a hand into one of his pockets, silently counting the amount of money he had on him. A small emerald and three gold coins. He didn't know how far that would get him, but he was sure he would be able to find a book trader somewhere who was willing to sell a journal to him so late in the day.

"I think we should both go," Sam suggested, accurately reading Ranboo's mind.

"Go?" He paused. "Oh, right. Go. Yeah..."

"Yes." An awkward silence fell between them both for a good while.

"How's the prison?" Ranboo suddenly asked, breaking the tension.

Sam shrugged ever so slightly. "I wouldn't know. I haven't been in today." That revelation took the hybrid slightly aback. The warden looked out to the black complex along the coast. "I haven't been able to face it today. I've just been walking around." He flinched. "It's bad of me, I know, but I just... It hurts sometimes, Ranboo. It hurts."

The conversation had circled back to mentally challenging problems, and Ranboo didn't like it. He took a few steps back. "I should leave... Techno will be wondering where I've taken his horse."

Sam seemingly snapped out of his thoughts with a jolt, and agreed. "If he ever threatens to kill you, just remind him that there's plenty of room in Pandora's Vault for another prisoner," he smirked, quite possibly only half-joking.

The hybrid allowed himself a small smile. "Will do."

"Take care of yourself, Ranboo."

"I, err, you too," the hybrid replied. He fumbled with Carl's reins, and started up the coastline. He didn't bother to mount the steed, for fear of exhausting him even more. Once arrived at the top, he turned back. Sam's figure was nothing more than a

silhouette against the light, sandy beach, staring out at the ocean. He stood there for a good while, before trekking back towards a small black building in the distance; the prison's entry way.

Ranboo continued along his way, down the Prime Path back towards the Greater SMP. Luckily, he crossed paths with a travelling book merchant, who sold him another, pristine journal for a fair price. Unfortunately, the transaction was made right outside Tommy's home, which made the hybrid look at it for much longer than he would have wanted to.

When the seller had left, Carl yanked his head towards the oak tree next to the cliff's edge. Ranboo spotted the figure sitting on the bench, staring off into the distance. He didn't say anything; the figure didn't acknowledge his presence. Ranboo knew that he should have said something, that he should have gone up to him, but his self-restraint held him back.

Instead, he guided Carl down the rest of the path, and left Tommy's phantom to his tranquility.

The entry hub was echoey and cold, just like the prison it guarded the entrance to. All it had in it was an unlit Nether portal, and a couple of small columns holding up the roof. It reminded Sam a little of the ancient temples when he had sketched out the initial design for the interiors.

"Warden!"

Sam didn't like it when people addressed him as "Warden". The Warden was a title; Warden was a name, like one would use to order around someone else, like "Guard" or "Private". He sometimes wished everyone would just drop the formalities and just call him Sam. He paused, just as he was about to put one of the many prison keys in the entry lock, ready to open the Nether portal to get inside. Turning around, the warden watched as someone approached him. From the light and richly ornate armour they wore, as well as the specific details, Sam guessed exactly where they were from. He waited until the soldier got closer, and greeted her with a polite hand gesture. "Yes?" he inquired.

The guard's face was quite passive, and she produced a letter from out of nowhere. Without a word, she handed it to the man, and stood at ease. Sam tore open the envelope, and unfolded the letter inside. He began to read.

Sam,

Las Nevadas is once more in need of your services, I'm afraid to inform you. Nothing big, but the magic might die if you don't come and check it out, and I don't think any of us would want that to happen. Right? :]

Regards, Q.

Despite feeling a little low after his prior conversation with Ranboo, Sam couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. "He could have just been less subtle and just said that one of the slot machines broke down," he laughed, glancing at the messenger.

The soldier remained completely still, her face as cold and unmoving as a statue's. For a guard supposedly working for the most relaxed, fun-loving nation in existence, she acted like the polar opposite of it. Looking at her much closely, Sam realized that she was young. Too young to be trained for battle and guarding duties.

Then again, so were Tubbo, and Tommy, and Ranboo, and so many others Sam did not know personally. It shocked him, yes, but he soon discovered that it was the norm now. Preparing your children for war was a common activity. It was sad, to say the least. Children were growing up much too fast nowadays, and never got the opportunity to have a proper childhood.

The warden quickly cleared his throat, and put on a business-worthy face. "Tell Quackity I'll be there in a day or so," he said.

"He has requested that you come much sooner."

"Well, I can't magically make the train go any faster, can I?"

"The Nether travel has been finally made and attempted," the guard told him. "Special visitors and guards are allowed to use it."

"Has it now?" Sam paused, then sighed. "Very well. I'll get there as soon as I can."

In truth, he wished that the business at Las Nevadas could have waited at least a week. His absences from the Vault were getting more and more frequent, and one of

these days, he felt like he'd pay for it. The soldier didn't even need the warden to dismiss her, it seemed; one minute, she was there, the next, she was gone.

Sam turned back to the lock, and turned the key. A flash of purple followed, and the portal frame lit up with a deafening hiss, wafting warm air from the dimension on the other side. Briefly checking behind him for any possible intruders, Sam entered. He stepped out of the other side almost immediately, into a room of quartz pillars and blackstone wall. This was not the entry room to the Vault, however; it was merely the secured hub in the Nether, allowing the linked portals to be protected by yet another layer of protection.

"Thin spots" were difficult things to study and control, but after many attempts and trial and error, Sam had finally managed to build and secure a system to open and close the prison's Nether portals at will.

He walked over to one of the pillars, and fumbled for a ridge in the wall. He inserted another one of the keys, and turned it. The portal's purple plasma shook before exploding like glass, into shards that evaporated immediately. He turned the key the other way, and the frame was lit up again. He ventured through once more.

Instead of turning up back outside, Pandora's Vault's main entry hall stretched out before him, as dark and ominous as ever. Sam sighed. He was home. Home, in this case, was used reluctantly. That's what the Vault was slowly becoming; his home. He spent more time patrolling near Dream than walking with his friends and his beloved Fran. He caught more brief moments of sleep seated at his desk rather than in his own bed. He saw more obsidian and blackstone than clear blue sky. Pandora's Vault was his home.

Pandora's Vault was his prison, in more ways than one.

He took a few tired steps forwards, stepping out of the obsidian frame. Something hit his foot, and clattered along the floor as it was kicked away. At the sudden noise, Sam looked down. And froze. He blinked once, then twice. The trident fell out of his grasp, falling to the floor beside him. He didn't even dare reach for it.

It was... No...

It burned and broke, the warden reminded himself. His hands started to tremble. *It burned in the lava after I broke it*. He was more and more insistent every time he said it. *It burned, it broke. It burned, it broke*. His initial surprise quickly turned to pure terror, which was something he hadn't felt in a long time.

If Tommy's compass had supposedly been destroyed, then what was it doing lying a meter or so in front of Sam, intact and gleaming?

Chapter Twenty-Two: Thorns & Horns

When night fell in the realm, it fell hard, and quickly. As soon as the sun would start to disappear, anyone who feared for their safety would start to pack up and seek shelter, making sure to stick close to the burning street lamps and any source of light. Nighttime was a dangerous time, and the perfect hunting ground for all the nocturnal monsters of the Overworld to stalk their prey.

The Nether had creatures like the piglins, the ghasts, the blazes and the wither skeletons; the Overworld had the creepers, the giant spiders, the skeletons and the zombies. Both dimensions also had small groups of hostile endermen who roamed and teleported around, attacking people and taking them off-guard. Night was a dangerous time to be out, although that didn't stop some taking a few strolls anyway.

Fundy was one of these particularly brave souls. He didn't know what had come over him. Maybe it was the fact he had locked himself up for months. Maybe it was the way he had managed to get used to the constant nightlife of Las Nevadas after only a day or so, and could no longer differentiate between the sun and the moon. Maybe it was even the confidence he had gained with the new, pristine, tailored suit he had bought that afternoon.

Or perhaps it was the fact that instead of the two lives he used to have, he had gained three more. Those three – bringing his total amount up to five – had been won gambling at the underground roulette table for ages. Eventually, it was Quackity himself who had to drag Fundy away after a few hours and multiple rounds of roulette, and continue showing him around.

Las Nevadas was the paradise Fundy had always dreamed of, and Big Q seemed to know that. After their casino adventures, he had treated his copper fox friend to the biggest and most delicious meal he had ever set his eyes on in The Butcher's Axe, and offered him his own, permanent room in the classiest hotel in the nation. His *own*, richly ornate suite, with the comfiest, king-sized bed quilted with silk and a panoramic view out over the glittering strip. And he could keep it. For free. He was also pleased to see

that Quackity had remembered his passion for redstone and machines, as he insisted that he'd show him around the hidden scenes of Las Nevadas at some point.

"You know Fundy," he had said to him when they parted ways at the tailor's. "I'm happy you decided to join us here. Las Nevadas needs someone like you to help run it."

After so long, Fundy was being appreciated, and absolutely spoiled with opportunities and gifts. The last time a similar situation had presented itself, he had been part of the Schlatt Administration, back during the dictator's autocratic reign of L'Manberg. The only difference now was that he was a spy for no one, and he trusted Big Q. Fully. In fact, he was tempted to say that he trusted him above anyone else now.

Now, walking down the Prime Path for the first time in weeks – after offering to be the first one through the newly installed Nether travel in his new nation –, he felt like someone. Someone special, someone important, and someone worth a million emeralds. The only downside to his nocturnal escapade was the absence of anyone out on the streets. No one got to see the new Fundy; the Fundy with a new taste in style, and life in general. He was a changed fox.

If only Wilbur could see him now.

The street lamps cast golden pools of light onto the wooden path, and Fundy made sure to walk through every single one, admiring his shimmering cufflinks and the gleam of his freshly washed fur. His tail waved behind him, and he inhaled deeply. The cool night air filled his lungs, and he sighed, content. After a while, his ears distracted by the unholy screeching of some unknown birds and the symphony of crickets, Fundy approached a large, long wall of dark blackstone. He paused, taking it in, and craning his neck to see the top.

He may have changed, sure, but that didn't mean he had managed to move on entirely from his past. The blackstone brought back so much to him. From the joy of the walls surrounding the old nation of L'Manberg, to the pain of Eret's betrayal and the Final Control Room. His father's neglect, and his people's resentment for his actions during Doomsday.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. Quackity was right; there was no room for regrets in Las Nevadas. He had to stop blubbering over the past and man up. Keeping an eye on the future was the only way forwards.

He continued walking along the walls, admiring Punz's castle on the other side. If the mercenary jobs paid enough to buy and build an entire estate, just imagine how

much Fundy could make simply by attending dinners with rich investors in Las Vegas... "What the..." All of a sudden, Fundy's eyes were drawn away from the buildings themselves, and instead to what seemed to be covering them. They were growths that Fundy had never thought he'd see again, especially now that he had all but moved a day's train ride away.

The Egg's red tendrils had invaded a good portion of the blackstone ramparts around the estate, layering and tangling like a strange, wicker weave and shoving their thorny stems through the cracks. They must have been there for quite a while, as a good number of glowing orange flowers and floating spores had taken to sprouting there. The fox remembered the day he had first seen the Egg. It was an awful memory, and one he tried to repress even more than the ones involving his own father. Sure, the mellow glows looked quite pretty at night, but it still filled him with a sense of deep dread.

He continued walking, down the path and past the tendrils. He kept his eyes low to the ground, avoiding the growths. He couldn't explain it, but he felt like it was watching him. Through the tendrils? The flowers? The spores? He didn't know. All he knew was that the unshakable feeling of being observed made him shiver.

He sped up his pace, and immediately crashed into something. At first, he thought it was a stray tendril, until the blade of a cutlass was suddenly pressed against his throat. He let out a strangled cry, and held up his hands. He stared at his attacker; a short, black cloaked figure.

"Fundy?" The fox breathed out a sigh of relief. He recognized the voice.

"Captain," he sighed, relieved as the sword was removed from his neck.

"You scared me!" she exhaled, sheathing her sword again and removing the black hood from her head.

In all honesty, he didn't know how to start a conversation. Captain Puffy wasn't an enemy by any means; during Tubbo's presidency in L'Manberg, they had plenty of wonderful interactions. But of course, just like everyone in Fundy's life, he had drifted away from their friendship. He now realized that it had been perhaps over a year that he hadn't seen her, the last sighting he remembered being her charging across an exploding battlefield during Doomsday. His stomach started to tie itself into guilty knots.

"I, um, I like what you've done to your hair."

She touched the long, thick braid of brown and white running down her back. "I have a daughter now, and it calms her to play a little with it. I'm not complaining either; I like it."

"A daughter?" Wow, time did fly quicker than he expected. "Congratulations."

Puffy's face lit up at his words. "Thank you," she smiled.

The fox continued fumbling for his words. A few minutes ago, he thought he was the freshest thing to ever roam the Greater SMP. Now, that seemed to have all gone down the drain. "So... Who's the father?" *Really? Really Fundy?* His ears flattened against his head in embarrassment.

To his relief, the captain burst out laughing. "Holy heck, not in that way!" she giggled. "It was an adoption, or rather, a rescue. But if you really want to know, then it would be Sam. That is if he wants to be somewhat involved beyond the rescue of the poor lovely."

The fox quickly pressed to change the subject. "What are you doing?"

"I could ask you the same thing. No one's seen you in ages."

"But you're trying to sneak around undetected," he pointed out, correctly guessing her motives from her black cloak.

The sheep smirked slightly, her ear twitching. "You're right, I'm much more suspicious than you." She turned back to the tendrils on the wall, and grabbed a small pouch of something from her pocket, and a lighter. "Stand back," she suggested, clicking the flint and steel together. It took her a few tries to finally catch a flame, but when she did, she quickly lit the pouch.

The flames licked at the scratchy, sack-like material, trying to get to the contents. As soon as they did, the red fire changed to a bright blue, and Puffy wasted no time in throwing it towards the tendrils. There was a bang, and the Egg's growths were suddenly engulfed by blue sparks and fire. Fundy watched the spectacle, gaping. In front of his very eyes, the tendrils were starting to shrivel up and disintegrate. It was getting destroyed, and that was something the fox hadn't seen before. The heat from the bonfire before him was sweltering, and he hurried to undo a bit of his collar.

Puffy must have seen his shock, as she turned to him. "Soul sand," she told him. "Only the blue fire from it seems to harm the sprouts."

"Thanks for letting me know." Gulping at the destructive scene, Fundy made a mental note to warn Quackity. The Egg seemed to be getting stronger every day, and if it eventually reached Las Nevadas, they had to be ready for it.

"Hey! YOU!" A voice raised above the crackles and the roaring of the flames, followed by a flurry of footsteps and the creak of a loaded crossbow. "Stop right there!"

Puffy quickly turned to the newcomer, and grabbed something from her pocket. "Sorry I can't stay long," she whispered, throwing the orb as far as she could.

In a flash, she was gone. Something whipped past Fundy's head, almost impaling him, and he screamed. He lowered his head, covering his ears and braced for an impact.

The footsteps drew nearer, and a sword was removed from its sheath. For the second time that night, the fox felt the cool and terrifying touch of a sharp blade pressed to his neck. He yelped, and straggled, but the attacker held him tight. Finally focusing his gaze, Fundy was faced with none other than the owner of the estate beside him, Punz. From his blood red eyes, he knew for a fact that he wasn't happy with what just happened to the tendrils. So many were corrupted nowadays, it was no longer a surprise.

"Where did they go?" the mercenary demanded to know.

The fox swallowed hard. "Who?" He tried to pretend to be oblivious, only to have the sword press further into him.

Punz growled. "So, you weren't talking to anyone then?"

"Anyone? No, I was alone, I—"

"So." The reply was cold and piercing, like Punz's eyes used to be before the Egg had got to him. "No one was there, eh? So I'm guessing you were the one who burnt the vines, weren't you?"

Realizing the mess Fundy had just got himself into, he let out a strangled cry. He knew he couldn't betray Captain Puffy.

"Well? Are you sure no one was with you?"

The fear of death overwhelmed him. "Captain Puffy," he gulped. "Puffy was there..."

After a tense few minutes, the sword was finally lowered from his neck, and he allowed himself to breathe freely again. Rubbing his throat, he cast his attacker a nervous glance.

Punz's smirk was wide, and knowing. "There," he hummed. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

The fox didn't reply.

The blade was re-sheathed, and the mercenary gave him a little nod, as if nothing had happened. The growths along his walls continued to smoulder with a dim, blue glow. "You look nice, Fundy," he complimented him after a moment or two. "Very snazzy."

"Thanks, I guess...?" Fundy tried to regain his composure. "I... I've joined Quackity in Las Nevadas."

If there was one thing he had remembered about Punz after their years of fighting on opposing sides, it was his respect and love authority. Although Fundy was like him, once, he had since become the higher power and was affiliated with a strong leader of a rich nation. Once, he and Punz had been equals on the battlefield; now one was now superior to the other, and the fox would exploit that as much as he could.

"Ah. That explains the costume change." Punz must have remembered a few things about him too. "Although you're still the same coward we all know you are."

The final comment was as sharp and sudden as a stab in the back, and Fundy felt the air get knocked out of him.

"It didn't take you much to seal the Captain's fate, now did it?" The mercenary nodded once more, much more mocking than anything, and returned to the safety of his domain. The gates banged shut, ringing in Fundy's ears.

He was horrified. Not by Punz's comment about "sealing" Puffy's fate, mind you, but rather by his own actions. He had five lives now. *Five of them*. And he knew how he could easily get more if he ever needed them. And yet, he had just sold out his old friend, because of some sort of irrational fear concerning a permanent death. With pure terror, he realized that the mercenary was right.

No matter how dressed up he was, or which position of power he was given, he was still the same, plain old coward he had always been. Not even multiple rounds of poker or roulette could change that.

The incident with the compass had shaken Sam unlike anything had done before, rivalled only by Tommy's own death. He didn't understand how the trinket – battered, broken and lost – had reappeared all of a sudden. He was the only one who had access to the Vault twenty-four hours a day. Even his fellow Badlands leaders could only get in if he was on the premises.

He could only think of one person who could have somehow had something to do with it, and so he interrogated Dream.

He tried to stay calm and composed during their interaction, breathing deeply and dangling the compass out in front of him. He didn't want to see the prisoner's twisted face so soon, but here he was. Again. Dream said nothing, shook his head, and shrugged. It was a behaviour the warden first took as insolence and done only to spite him further, but soon realized, when his rage had died down, that it was genuine. The prisoner had no idea, and how could he anyway?

Dream was locked up, away from any form of outside contact. The lava wall was thick enough to make sure he couldn't have nabbed the device if or when it rolled into it. He couldn't leave his cell, and what benefit would he have to sneak through the entire prison complex only to leave Tommy's compass at the door, and then quietly return to his obsidian cage? To terrify the warden, perhaps, but even then, it was highly unlikely. Although the criminal clearly wasn't the culprit, Sam still found the way he seemed to take macabre amusement in his jailer's difficulty to control his emotions very disturbing. He ended their meeting soon after with a couple of carefully chosen insults, and returned to the entry hall.

The golden compass weighed heavy in his grasp, but he couldn't seem to let it go. He was scared. Someone from the outside had managed to break into Pandora's Vault. That was the only explanation. He didn't know which outcome he preferred between that and Dream managing to leave his cell. He knew he should have done a full check of Pandora's Vault after deducing what happened, but he couldn't bring himself to. He knew for a fact that breaking in was impossible. Even the copious amounts of TNT set off the day Tommy was trapped didn't make a single dent in the roof, so how could someone manage to break in silently through the walls? And if, by means too powerful

and unknown to the warden, someone did get in, why leave Tommy's compass and do nothing else?

As a warning, the compass acting as a phantom of Sam's failures?

A sign that someone held him a hundred percent accountable for Tommy's death, and was out to get him?

Who's to say it was even the real compass anyway? It might of been another, similar one.

Sam knew, however, that this one was the original one. From the particular, triangle-shaped dent on the battered lid to the faded inscription of "Your Tubbo" on the back, this was the real thing. All the questions and the terror made his brain hurt so much, and he couldn't bear to think of all the possibilities.

In the end, he decided to leave it, lying face down on his desk. He had to leave the prison for the time being; get distracted, go do something else. Perhaps the compass was a figment of his imagination. Maybe his mind was simply playing tricks on him, like he had told Ranboo it was. But then the discs were another thing, how—

No.

He had to stop thinking. He had to stop fearing and dreading.

After less than two hours inside Pandora's Vault, Sam had left and locked it up again. He went to the only place that he knew was made to distract, to unwind and relax. Anyway, he was called there the same day.

When he had arrived at the Badlands' Nether portal, another guard possibly sent by Quackity himself was already there, waiting for him. When the warden approached, he nodded and coaxed him into the Nether. From there, all Sam had to do was follow him towards the main portal junction, and onto a new branch that had been built the same day. The warden was wildly impressed at how the garrisons of Las Nevadas had managed to install a pathway so quickly. Sure, it was a rickety bridge held in precarious suspension above a wide lava lake, but it still looked and felt sturdy enough to be used until a road had been built linking the main portals and this one.

Sam wondered if Quackity knew that his few battalions had the mind, the swiftness and quite possibly the strength to rival any of the other, larger armies. Then again, Big Q was a smart man, and one who was involved in politics and military groups since his

arrival in the Greater SMP's realms. The warden knew for a fact that Quackity knew exactly what he was doing when it came to his new nation.

Speaking of his friend, Big Q greeted him the moment he stepped out of the Nether portal and back into the Overworld. His attire was just as dazzling and glimmering as the flashing lights of the entertainment empire behind him. He clapped his hands together and smiled. As usual, his grin was crooked from his scar, but welcoming nonetheless.

"Hello, partner!" he laughed. "How are you?"

Sam hadn't seen Quackity in a while, but didn't exactly want to answer his question. "Fine," he replied, forcing out a smile of his own under his gas mask. He could hear his breath shake and echo. He hoped his friend could not.

"Excellent, excellent," Big Q sighed, looking him up and down. "I thought you'd dress for the occasion though."

The warden looked down at himself. With his armour, heavy gloves and cloak and his trident, he admitted that he looked a little too battle-worthy and on edge than he maybe should have been. He remembered the incident with the compass and the possible break in, and swallowed hard. "Well, my job doesn't allow room for relaxation," he replied.

Quackity seemed to understand. "Of course. But now you're in Las Nevadas, and there's nothing to worry about here."

A few minutes later, both of them were high in the sky. Instead of heading into the casino to fix whatever it was Quackity had called him in for, Sam was led towards The Needle. Possibly the tallest building in the nation, it stretched high, high up into the sky, with a small hub at the top which Quackity had since called his home. It was all a pure, clean white, and lit up by soft blue sea lanterns. A balcony stretched all around the edge, giving out onto the tops of all the buildings below.

The nighttime sky was magnificent, sprinkled with thousands of stars that the light pollution below didn't allow anyone on The Strip to see. Once arrived at the top, Quackity had managed to persuade the visitor to relax, and dispose of all his armour and heavy belongings, which were now carefully piled on the floor beside the door.

Sam, trying to stay as collected as possible, took a while to adjust his eyes to the shining white all around him. In comparison to the blackness of the Vault, the glare of

The Needle – and most of Las Nevadas, to be frank – was a real shock to anyone's senses. Overwhelming would be the correct term for it. Through the open threshold leading out onto the balcony, a light bit of snow started to twirl through the air.

"Hello, Quackity from Las Nevadas!" a chirpy little voice piped up, followed by an unstable figure that came careening around the corner. Carrying an empty tray in his hand and wearing a waiter's uniform that was two sizes too large for him, the newcomer looked as human as someone could be. His movements and body, however, had a certain droopiness and unbalance to them, as if he was made of some sort of goo. The theory was somewhat confirmed by the slight green tint to his skin and in his light brown hair.

Big Q let out a small sigh of exasperation, then introduced his butler to Sam. "This is Charlie," he told him. "He's made of slime."

"Oh, that makes sense."

"I am human," Charlie immediately said, trying to stand straight and still. Even then, he wobbled like a bowlful of jelly. "Made of meat."

Quackity let out a little chuckle. "He think we're going to kill him if he reveals what he is," he continued. "He doesn't realize that it's obvious anyway."

"Would Quackity from Las Nevadas and his friend like something to drink?" Charlie chirped, clearly trying to change the subject. Sam thought it best to refuse, foreseeing that the refreshments wouldn't get to them in one piece, but his friend quickly took control of the situation.

"We can do it ourselves," he said. "Thank you. You should go take the night off."

Charlie blinked at his superior through his square-rimmed glasses. "Take it off?" he asked, confused. "I don't think the night would like that... Would *you* like it if someone took you off from somewhere?"

Big Q sighed again, then waved him away. "Just... go explore Las Nevadas, or find Fundy, or... something."

The slime's face lit up. "I'll go find Fundy!" he exclaimed, rushing towards the exit. "He said he wants to show me what a "vodka" is!" Every footstep Charlie made was followed by a squelch as he hobbled out of room, and Sam was pretty sure that the small green drops of goop on the pristine white floor were from him as well.

"We'll be alone for a while," Quackity hummed, inviting Sam to sit down. Somewhat cautious, he tried to settle himself comfortably on the upright, dark blue velvet divan he had been graciously offered.

"So," Quackity began. Sam turned his attention to him. His host was standing in front of one of the large, panoramic windows, pouring two glasses of something out of a crystal decanter. "How have you been?"

"You've already asked me that," the warden reminded him.

Big Q smiled, and walked back to his guest. "I know, but now we're alone." He offered him a particularly large glass of a light green drink, which Sam accepted curiously.

Politely waiting for permission from his friend, he sipped a small bit, and reeled back. He let out a small cough, then cleared his throat.

Quackity lounged on the sofa in front of him, and watched his reaction with humour. "Absinthe," he told him. "It's a little strong."

"I noticed," the warden agreed, swirling the contents of his glass. It was indeed incredibly strong, in both aroma and taste. It was exactly what he needed to clear his head, and he took another sip. Opposite him, Quackity took a large swig, which immediately made Sam panic. It made him wonder how much his friend had actually been drinking in Las Nevadas to build up such a tolerance to the alcohol.

"Well? You still haven't answered my question."

"I'm..." Maybe it was the exhaustion, or maybe the absinthe helped him loosen up a little. Either way, he was too tired to lie. "Stressed, to say the least."

"The prison?"

"Of course." He left it at that. He didn't necessarily want Big Q to know all the details.

"I see." Sam didn't realize that Big Q had finished his drink until he grabbed the decanter and poured himself another glass. "You should come to Las Nevadas more often, partner."

"I can't afford to," the warden replied.

"You do when I ask you to," Big Q pointed out, gesturing to their current situation.

"I'm doing my job; there's a difference. What exactly did you need me to fix?"

Quackity was quick to shut him down. "I don't recall my note ever saying that you needed to fix anything."

Sam was puzzled. "It gave that impression."

"Then perhaps you should stop assuming," his friend said gently. It was definitely meant to be a teasing remark, but it still made Sam bristle ever so slightly. "I brought you here to ask you something."

"Oh?" The warden leaned forwards, somewhat intrigued. "And you couldn't just ask me about it in your letter?"

"It would be better if I talked to you face to face." He clapped his hands, and sat up. "But before I do, have you got any new plans for Las Nevadas?"

Sam was startled by the shift in tone, but nodded. He stood up. "Enderchest?" he requested. Quackity pointed to a dark black chest a little further away, and the warden went over to it. Opening it up, he removed a couple of large rolls of parchment, and quickly took the opportunity to check that all his other valuables were still safely in it. He carried the plans back over to Quackity, and rolled them out in front of him. "You wanted a new hotel, right?"

"Ah yes, I remember now! Show me what you've got!"

From his enthusiastic response, Sam would have thought that their conversation would have been quite short. He was quite wrong. When it came to his nation, Quackity was a dreamer, a visionary, but a strict one at that. If a building had a flaw, he wouldn't want it. And apparently, Sam's different blueprints for this new hotel each had a fault.

This one was "too pointy".

That one "looked too old".

And "what the heck" was that one over there supposed to be?

After a while, Sam felt the need to put his foot down. "Quackity," he began through gritted teeth. "If you don't tell me what you want, I can't help you."

Big Q huffed. "Sam, remember. This is a partnership; I entrusted you to create what you think would work."

"And I did that. I don't know what more you want from me."

Quackity's gaze and hands were suddenly drawn to a plan at the bottom of the pile, and he brushed the others away. He very nearly knocked over the couple of glasses, but Sam's quick reflexes saved them at the last moment. Holding the plan up to the light, Quackity scrutinized it for a good few minutes. Then he smiled. "This, Sam," he said. "This is the one I want from you."

The warden took the parchment from his friend, and stopped. He stared at it, and immediately began to roll it up. "I'm sorry," he said, rushing to try and put it away. "I didn't mean to put this one in the pile."

"No, no, please," his host tutted, stopping him before he could snap the enderchest shut. He took it back out of his hands. "I really like this. It's perfect."

"Quackity—"

"Even if you don't deem it complete, it's quite—"

"I'm sorry, but no. It's already been built."

"Already been built?"

Sam hesitated before answering. He took a swig of the remaining absinthe in his glass, and waited until the pain and dizziness had died down in order to speak. "Tommy," he said simply. "It's Tommy's hotel. After L'Manberg, he wanted to try and branch out, and..." He trailed off. "I helped him with it, and I forgot the plans were still in my possession." He didn't go on. Quackity could figure out the rest on his own.

From Big Q's look, he did. He understood Sam's pain, that much was clear, but did he seem to care? No. No he didn't. "Tommy's not here any more, is he?" he hummed. He lightly tapped the plan. "May as well use it, eh?"

"But—"

"So what if it already exists in the Greater SMP? It'll have much more use in somewhere like Las Nevadas." Before Sam could stop him, Quackity had walked out onto the balcony, peering down to his empire below. "Where do you think we should lay the foundations?"

The warden stayed silent, trying to process everything that just happened. Not only the shock was shaking him, but the alcohol began to hurt his brain. Before long, he had amassed enough strength to join his business partner outside.

Quackity must have taken his silence as a sign of resentment, as he sighed. His next words were spoken in a low voice, harsh and cold. "Sam. Las Nevadas has no room for regrets. I warned you the moment I offered you the partnership."

"I know," Sam replied, somewhat bitter. "But that was before I had something to regret."

"It wasn't your fault," Big Q suddenly said, his tone considerably softer than before. "Tommy's death wasn't your fault, and it's time you realize that."

So many people – namely close friends to whom he had decided to tell what exactly happened in the cell that day – had said the same thing: "It wasn't your fault, Sam." He would retort and disprove their words, certain that they were only spoken out of pity, so much so that he had enough. So when Big Q said the same thing, Sam didn't have the patience or the energy to argue that subject any more.

"The best thing we can do for Tommy now is to keep some of his legacy alive," Quackity continued, focusing back on the plans. "And that's what we're going to do by adding his building to Las Nevadas."

Legacy. What is a legacy?

No, what would *Tommy* want his legacy to be? It wasn't for an estranged, ex-L'Manbergian Vice-President to decide for the departed, no matter how close they used to be during their time together in the cabinet or in the Pogtopian rising. But Sam didn't argue. He couldn't argue. Not any more.

"Are you listening?"

"Sorry." Sam had zoned out, pressed against the balcony ledge, and quickly focused on his friend's words again.

"I said, how about behind the venue hall?" Big Q repeated, pointing to a domed building to the left.

The warden shrugged. "It's your empire, you decide."

"Then, yes. It'll be built there." Seems like Quackity didn't necessarily have the strength or the will to argue with his friend either. Anyway, as of now, any attempt Sam made to deter him would be met with a sharp dismiss. "It'll look perfect, trust me. I'll bring the builders together tomorrow to tell them the good news, and we can start work right away."

"Great." The reply came with no conviction whatsoever.

"Enough about Las Nevadas." The plans were rolled up again, and Quackity held them behind his back. "And on to the small favour I had to ask you."

Sam raised his head. "A favour? I thought you'd just want to ask me a—"

"Question?" Big Q chuckled. "Assumptions yet again, Sammy."

The warden scowled. He was being talked down to, by someone no less that wouldn't have the fabulous nation he had today if it wasn't for Sam's help. He was very tempted to remind him, but Quackity got a word in first.

"I need to get into the Vault," he said, taking Sam aback a little.

Quackity was with the party on the day of the arrest, and had helped escort Tommy and Tubbo back home when the danger had been shackled. He had a hatred for Dream as much as anyone else did.

"You want to see Dream?" Sam checked, puzzled.

He nodded. "Yes."

"I..." The warden was at a loss. "Quackity, since Tommy was... I stopped all visits to the Vault."

"You're scared he's going to kill another visitor?"

"I would do anything to avoid that."

"Then let me bring in a weapon."

"No." This time, the answer was harsh and certain. The last thing that Sam wanted or needed was the already deadly criminal to be armed, and kill someone else on his watch.

Big Q frowned. "Why not?"

"It's against prison protocol, Quackity."

"Well you know what," his friend suddenly said. "Obeying prison protocol is what made you responsible for Tommy's death. That shows you how awful it is." The warden froze. Quackity had suddenly switched, from denying his part in Tommy's demise to blaming him fully for the tragedy. Anger boiled inside his veins, but he miraculously managed to stay composed. "Look, Sam. I'm not going to try and break him out. I hate him just as much as anyone does. I have a matter to discuss with him, and a weapon would help me get it."

In a flash, he finally understood. "You're going to threaten him?"

"In a way, yes."

The warden's throat tightened. "Are you going to torture him?"

Quackity nodded. "If I must."

Convincing Sam to break all the prison regulations and safety measures was no easy task. It took all of Quackity's persuasion and charisma – and guilt tripping, if he was being completely frank – to finally get him to cave in. Reluctantly, Sam had eventually agreed, although he drew the line at letting Big Q have his own entry key to the Vault.

Quackity had to admit, he didn't try too hard to get it, and one refusal was enough for him to back down. He got what he initially wanted, and smiled his crooked smile. "It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Sam," he said.

The warden responded with minimal decorum, and his desire to leave as quickly as possible was apparent. The goodbyes were hurried, and Sam didn't even stop to put his armour back on. He just grabbed his stuff, mumbled something along the lines of a thank you, and left. The redstone elevator Sam had specifically designed for The Needle got to work, and the warden descended back down below. Big Q didn't try to hold him back. He had no reason to. Sam was particularly jumpy and agitated that evening, and it might have been better if he left before he suddenly did something rash, like throw Quackity off the balcony in response to a joke that went too far.

The leader of Las Nevadas sat down on the plush blue divan once again, setting the plans for the Big Innit Hotel next to him. He poured himself another, smaller glass of absinthe, getting light headed at the sickly herbal aroma. As much as his business partner was cold this evening, he had still proved to be reasonably compliant and useful. Las Nevadas was ready to benefit from a new, magnificent building.

He rolled out the plans, and directed his gaze to the corner. Three signatures were etched into the parchment. The first one, quite obviously belonged to Sam. The second was a small paw print, that Quackity soon managed to identify as a racoon's. The third and final signature, strangely professional for the boy he used to know, was Tommy's.

Quackity wondered if the reason why Sam was so protective over these particular plans was the fact that they still held a piece of the departed within them. If so, Big Q made a mental note to talk to him about letting go. The governing and prosperity of Las Nevadas had no room for emotions of that sort.

When he first offered the business venture to Sam, Quackity knew he had made a good choice. An ambitious, bold and determined associate, skilled in multiple areas; that's what Big Q needed for his new nation. And that's what Sam was, once. The warden had since softened. If one petty death was enough to crush him forever, then may the gods help his soul.

"Fucking hell," a raspy voice suddenly growled.

Quackity closed his eyes briefly, sighing and taking a sip of his drink. The sweet, liquorice taste burned his throat as it went down, and the alcohol went straight to his head. He took a moment to compose himself, and glared at the seats in front of him. "Well, I didn't think you'd show your face tonight," he said, narrowing his eyes.

The owner of the raspy voice smirked. He was slouched against the back of the settee, an arm draped over the back and a leg bent under him. He was dressed in a dark black suit, with a loose red tie and unbuttoned shirt. Everything about his appearance looked dirty and unkempt, except for his prominent sideburns and beard. Even the two curved ram horns either side of his head were chipped and scratched. His floppy, animal-like ears protruded out from either side of his head, occasionally twitching and streaked with white fur, just like his hair. Was it from age or something else? No one knew. His eyes were sunken in, wide and bloodshot. His face was almost skeletal with deep, shadowed ridges. If someone was asked to describe their perception of Satan, this image would be almost consistent from person to person. A crazed, horned man in a suit, who had an unexplainable charisma and hypnotizing glare.

Quackity felt his red neck tie begin to choke him, and he loosened it a little. He hoped that the ram in front of him didn't notice. It didn't seem like he did, and the newcomer turned his attention to the door. He ignored Quackity's previous comment, and continued in a low voice. "Didn't take you long to run off and thirst after another tall, strong and handsome guy, did it?" He wolf-whistled. "Hot damn..."

Big Q rolled his eyes, and let out a small cough of annoyance. "You're not tall, Schlatt," he mumbled.

The ram seemed to take offence to the comment, but did what he always used to do, responding with a piercing stare and a cocky smile. "I was still bigger than you'll ever be, baby," he growled, ending with a macabre chuckle. Quackity gagged at his indecent joke. "And anyway, you just admitted that I am indeed handsome and strong—"

"Shut up."

"Tough crowd tonight, eh?" Without a sound, Schlatt snatched up the decanter off the table, and began drinking— no, chugging down the contents like there was no tomorrow, with a speed that even Quackity was impressed by. Once finished, he placed it back down, with a sigh, and licked his lips. "I fucking miss that absinthe shit... Makes me feel alive."

Big Q still sometimes found it hard to process that Schlatt was a phantom. Not only was he only slightly see-through, but he acted no different to his old, living self. If it wasn't for the fact he could catch glimpses of the light green drink course through his body, he would have been persuaded the Manberg dictator was still with them. To be completely honest, thank goodness he wasn't. Big Q liked to thank Schlatt's substance abuse and impromptu stroke that killed him during November 16th on the daily. When his ghost came back to him, however, that's what really started the nightmares all over again.

"What Sam and I have going is a business partnership," Quackity said through gritted teeth.

Schlatt smirked. "We had a business partnership too," he reminded him, a seductive rumble rising at the back of his throat.

Big Q glared at him. "Sam and I have a *normal* business partnership, and not one where he's constantly trying to get me into his bed or undressing me with his eyes."

"Pfff." Schlatt tutted, and snatched the other's half finished glass, downing the rest of the contents in one gulp. "He doesn't know what he's missing."

"Fattest ass in the cabinet". That's what "President" Schlatt kept introducing Quackity as to whoever he met. The first few times, Big Q took it as a friendly joke. After all, it was his and Schlatt's combined votes that had won the first L'Manberg election, and they got on well. But as time went on, the Vice-President had come to realize that it was much, much more than friendly banter. The joking, public comments soon turned into private praises, then to furtive touches, and soon escalated into something Quackity could no longer control. President Schlatt held so much control over not only Manberg, but its people too. Especially when it came to his cabinet.

Quackity was somewhat relieved at the time that he was the only one being approached like he was; Fundy and Tubbo kept cordial and exclusively friendly relations with the president. That said, when they were both revealed as spies for the Pogtopia revolutionaries, Quackity couldn't say he was surprised. Or angry.

"Anyway, what was he doing over here?" the horned man asked.

Quackity glared at him. "You're joking, right?"

He shrugged.

"You saw everything, don't lie."

"Yeah, I saw everything. Doesn't mean I bothered to listen though. Your "normal" business partner there is quite a hunk of mea– I mean, a fetching distraction..." He whistled again. "I'd let him rail me, or I'd rail him. Depending on my mood."

"And you're calling me the one thirsting after him?"

Schlatt scoffed, and started searching the cabinets for some more alcohol. Closing his hand around the neck of a whiskey bottle, he shrugged and popped it open. "I'm just saying, baby. I like myself a partner with a good build. Speaking of which..." He trailed off, looking Quackity up and down. "You should work out more."

Big Q was at the end of his tether, and stood up angrily. "You're the one who fucking gambled against me for this," he yelled. "The LEAST you could do is fucking pay attention!"

"Alright, alright." Schlatt took a swig of the bottle. "I'm listening."

"I managed to persuade Sam to let me into the Vault."

"Hm." The reply he received was dull and almost uninterested.

Quackity balled up his fists. "I can get to Dream, and afterwards—"

"You know, I never noticed how golden whiskey looked," Schlatt hummed, his eye glued to the glass bottle.

Quackity snapped. With a quick, clean swipe, he knocked the bottle out of the phantom's hand. It smashed against the wall, dripping the remains of its contents down from a large splatter. "WILL YOU FUCKING LISTEN?!?"

Schlatt was frozen to the spot for a good while, until he started panning from his hand to the wall. He closed his own fist, eyeballing Quackity. The look he gave was purely murderous, and for a moment, Big Q regretted his outburst. "You're lucky, Quackity," he snarled at him. "If I wasn't dead, I'd fucking throttle you right now."

After a good while of experience with the dictator, Quackity knew that it was no empty threat. However, he also knew that the threat in question was an open door, and one he used to grab the ghost's attention. "Well, you might not have to wait much longer," he said, his scowl turning into a crooked smirk.

Schlatt narrowed his eyes. "How so?"

"Sam is letting me into Pandora's Vault," he repeated. "I can get to Dream, and with a little bit of... persuasion... I can get the book from him."

Schlatt was silent for a while. "The book..." He rolled the word around in his mouth, his anger fading into a dark satisfaction. He let out a low chuckle. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Dream is made of stronger stuff than we think," Quackity warned his old partner. "Getting him to talk will be difficult."

Schlatt's gaze had now turned even more malicious, and even downright satanic. The world around them seemed to dim, and a sharp chill ran up Quackity's spine.

"Well, then I suggest you break every single bone in his body," the ram told him. "And when they're all snapped in two, break them again, into three. Then into four. Then into five. Grind his skeleton to dust. Do whatever it takes. I want the Revive Book back in my possession."

Quackity nodded. "I'll do my best."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Coded Confessions

The Badlands' seat of power didn't have a name. It didn't really need one. Some called it the White Mansion, due to its glittering white walls and roof. Others called it the Castle on the Cliff, a rather fitting one considering its location. Another name that was often used was The Pearl of Pandora's Vault, because of its close proximity to the prison itself.

Bad called it home.

The mansion was perched precariously on the edge of a rocky peak, a third of its structure hanging over a neck-breaking drop onto the beach below. It was just high up enough to manage to drown out the incessant roaring of the ocean waves once inside, and was therefore deemed perfect as a spot to install the leadership. Watched over by the Badlands' flag hoisted up at the top of a flagpole, the mansion still shimmered, even in the dead of night.

Bad wandered the corridors and empty rooms, like a shadow seeking an owner. The mansion was deathly silent, and quite honestly, a little too large for the small trio at the head of the nation. Sam barely spent his time here any more, too occupied with the prison and his own hidden home in the mountains.

There were no ministers, no form of parliament to populate the desolate mansion. It was a bit of a shame, as the splendour inside was carefully chosen and put in place. Hundreds of silk banners depicting the same flag – a silvery blue trident on a dark black background, along with crimson highlights – lined every available wall, still and unmoving like a heavily disciplined army awaiting their general's command. Velvet red curtains hung over and across every doorway, with dark black tassels and ties sweeping the floor.

Only Bad, Ant and Sam really got to see the inside of the mansion. It was just the three of them leading, and their people seemed happy with that, as were they.

A golden light danced at the end of the long corridor, and Bad followed it. He stepped into a room. The study was unlike any other chamber inside the mansion.

Whereas all the other walls and floors were purely white, this room was carpeted with rich red rugs, and its walls were lined with dark oak pillars and bookshelves. Dusty leather volumes filled every single shelving space, and quite a bit of the floor. Occasional spaces were taken up by mysterious, bottled objects like eyes, tongues and even brains in some cases, and a few taxidermy specimens hanging from higher up the walls, or even on stands and displayed in the corners and on the shelves and tables, depending on their size. Two tall windows gave out onto the ocean, letting in the moon and starlight. With a large fire roaring in the hearth and lit candelabras specked around the room, the study felt warm and cosy. It was a huge contrast to the rest of the pristine, disciplined mansion.

Bad called out to the figure at the desk. "Hey, Ant."

Antfrost looked up from the large, dark desk, and put down his quill. It sunk back into the inkwell, and he wiped a few drops of stray ink from his arms. "Hey Bad," he purred. His eyes were half closed, heavy with exhaustion.

The demon fumbled around in the picnic basket he was carrying, and withdrew a plump, golden muffin. "I thought you might be hungry," he smiled, placing it down on the desk.

The cat licked his whiskers, eyeing the food hungrily. "I haven't eaten since this morning," he confessed. "I've been occupied with the translation."

"Well, take a break, then!"

Antfrost raised an eyebrow at him as the demon started to amble around the study, leaving the basket on a pile of ancient-looking volumes leaning against a taxidermy wolf, its pelt thick with dust. Bad knew that it was only a matter of time until his friend caved in and devoured the whole thing, and he was right when he turned back and saw the cat lick his paws, laced with small crumbs.

"I don't know how you do it, Bad," he heard Ant sigh from behind him. "You've been making the same muffins for years, and yet they all taste so different and wonderful every time I have another one!" Meanwhile, the demon was busy dragging his claws along a shelf of heavy leather books, absent-mindedly reading the titles on the spines.

Necromancy Through The Ages

Artillery And Dynamite: The Finest Of Weapons

A Complete Analysis Of The Three Lives System

The Ender-Folk And Their Customs

"Ah, you know I can't tell you how I do it," Bad chuckled, his white gaze lingering on a jar containing some odd-looking sack of venom, floating around in an unidentifiable, thick liquid. "Baker's secret!"

In truth, he didn't know either. He just followed his usual recipe; he never tried anything new. Perhaps it was simply the love and care he put into his muffins that made them so scrumptious. Or perhaps the wild blueberries he used were laced with some sort of magic, put there by the nymphs who roamed the forests he picked them from. Bad turned back to Ant, who had almost immediately returned to his work, his brow furrowed in concentration and some form of confusion. The demon watched him for a minute or two, then decided to approach him. Merely glancing at the workspace, Bad was taken aback by the number of different papers strewn about. Ranboo's lost memory book was open at a double page of coded scribbles, that Ant was busy copying out onto another sheet of parchment. He left a space between each line, where he wrote some more, this time with the translated letters. Words, then sentences began to form under each stroke of the quill.

Although Ant worked at a speed unlike anything Bad ever expected from him, there were still clearly mountains of work to do. "How's it going?" he asked.

The cat dropped his quill, and reclined in his chair. He sighed loudly. "I'm enjoying it," he told his friend. "I really am." He smiled. "It's been so long since I've actually done anything research related, and I love it."

Bad chuckled. "That's good to hear!"

"But..."

"But?" Bad didn't expect there to be a "but" involved.

Ant flipped back through the memory book. "It's... concerning... I keep thinking that I'm getting words and phrases wrong, just because of how ridiculous and out of character for the author they sound, but I'm not. I mean, look at this." The cat gestured to the papers strewn before him.

Bad glanced down, trying to differentiate between the Ender and the actual translations. Catching sight of the correct scribbles, he lazily read a couple of lines. To be

honest, ender-folk behaviour and language was Ant's passion, not his. Maybe, if he had a quiet moment another day or so, he'd allow himself to spend a couple of hours reading through everything. At least, that's what he thought he'd do, if the first sentences weren't so ominous. Bad read a few more lines, hypnotized with every word, until he finally had to gather up a bunch of the papers and sit down on another, leather backed chair beside the desk.

He felt Ant's gaze burn through him as he gawked over his translation work, his tail gently flicking his leg. Although Bad had known Antfrost for years now, he could still never read him quite right. He didn't know if his tail's flicks right now were prideful ones, or disturbed by the contents of the Ender passages. His reply came soon after, confirming his agitation. "Poor kid," the cat mumbled. "He must be constantly petrified."

The demon shook his head, his eyes still glued to the pages. "Are you sure this is what he wrote?" he checked.

Ant let out a small, indignant hiss at the remark. "Positive," he confirmed.

Bad gently put the pages back onto the desk, sliding them back to his friend. "Every bit of this is incriminating evidence." Of course, he had deduced that from the two pages he picked up at random, but he was certain that the others bore similar contents. Evidence. Evidence against what exactly? He didn't know, and he didn't particularly care to find the exact crimes associated with these coded confessions. All he knew is that they would be enough to destroy the author, in more ways than one.

"U4L ∴ T J7 .||J= J::L ∴ |LL ∴ ."

The hissing voice that reached his ears startled him. From Ant's twitching ears and bristled fur, he had seemingly heard something as well. A silence fell soon after, where the two leaders stared at each other, searching the other's face to see if they were on the same page.

"We could use this as leverage," Bad eventually uttered, eyeing the memory book on the desk.

"Leverage..." Ant repeated. It wasn't a question, nor a statement. It sounded like an echo of Bad's last sentence. His red eyes were misted, lost and unfocused.

"If any of this gets out, he would be done for."

Another moment of silence fell between them. The wind whistled outside, rattling the glass panes with sharp, precise jabs.

"No, we can't do this Bad." For a moment there, Bad thought that the Egg had taken control of Ant's thoughts, from his distant gaze to the echo in his voice. The sudden interjection broke down that possibility. For now.

The demon frowned. "What?"

"Ranboo's just a kid," Ant mewled, sighing. He gestured to the papers. "And a pretty troubled one if you ask me."

The reply he got didn't answer his question, and for a hot second, Bad thought he was faced with Sam after another day of Tommy being in lockdown inside the Vault. The first day, Bad had been sympathetic to the warden, and even offered to help investigate the issue – which Sam politely declined, maintaining the fact that it was too serious to let anyone else get involved. During the next few days, however, he soon began to realize that the situation was starting to take a toll on Sam's duties to both the Badlands and to the Egg, and he became much harsher with his remarks. So when Tommy never came out alive...

Bad had formed his opinion on the matter of the excuse of someone being "just a kid". A harsh one to be sure, but was the only one he had witnessed and experienced.

"I think we should just forget all of this and give the journal back," Ant continued, but Bad quickly shut him down.

"Keep translating," he told him, his expression hardening. "Get every bit of information you can from it. Then, we'll confront him."

"You mean threaten him?" the cat asked, eyes wide. "Did you not hear me? He's just a troubled kid–"

"You know what, Antfrost?" Bad interjected, finally voicing his opinion on the matter after holding his tongue for so long. "This realm has been torn apart by devastating wars, revolutions and battles for so long. Being an innocent child has no meaning any more. It doesn't *mean* anything any more, Ant. They'll get muffed anyway. Children are leading revolutions, armies and even nations now." He could feel the bewildered gaze of his friend on him, but he kept going. "If we were back in the era way before L'Manberg, then yes. Yes, Ranboo would be a kid, because he'd be able to have a childhood. But we're not in the past; we're in the present. They are not kids,

because they don't act like them. They think they're stronger, smarter and more capable than anyone older than them, and most of the time, they are." His tone hardened. "If they want to act like adults, then it's because they want to be treated as such." He stared at his friend. "And that's what we'll do. Ranboo is not a kid. He has to face the harsh truth." He caressed the memory book. "And we'll be the ones to provide it."

He took a deep breath. He looked back up at Antfrost, whose eyes were wide with surprise at the sudden soliloquy that reached his ears. Bad thought he was going to try and argue, but he didn't. Instead, Ant's face softened, and he nodded. "Alright then," he agreed. "We'll provide the harsh truth, then."

"Keep translating," the demon told him, turning back to reclaim his picnic basket. "But don't do anything without me. Not until I get back."

"Get back?" Ant questioned him just before he walked out of the room. "Get back from where?"

Bad hesitated, then realized that his friend had the right to know. At least, he had to know the vague story. "I'm going on a small trip for a week or so," he said. "Meanwhile, I need you to look after the Eggpire."

"Me?" Antfrost spluttered, pointing at himself.

"Yes, you. Sam's busy with the Vault, and you're a marquis, are you not?"

"Only by title," he replied. "I always follow you and Sam when it comes to leadership."

"Well," Bad smiled. "There's a first time for everything, right?"

"I guess..." Ant looked like he was about to protest further, but had apparently made the wise decision to stay silent and accept his position. "I'll try my best."

"I know you will."

With those final words of encouragement, Bad left the study, and started to make his way out of the mansion. Before he opened the front door, he stopped. He reached up around his neck, and fished out a necklace, hidden down his clothes. He held it up to the faint light. A large pendant encrusted with a massive, glittering red gem shone into his eyes, making him wince. Staring closely, he could almost see an eye bore into him from the stone, ever watchful, ever listening.

He rushed to hang it up behind one of the multiple flags lining the halls, letting the dark material swallow it in darkness. It would be safe until he got back. The moment he had let go of the pendant, the Egg's incessant whispers had silenced. Bad certainly preferred it that way.

Bad had lived a particularly stable life. Unlike others who had travelled from distant nations or who chose to go on adventures to far away lands, Bad had remained rooted in the Greater SMP since he met the others who began to populate the land. It didn't matter where he came from, or how he got there.

He was a demon, sure, and the others were wary at first by his sudden arrival, but he soon won over their hearts with his sweet and helpful personality, his marvellous patisserie delights and his strict rule to replace any sort of curse word by a variation of "muffin". Many still teased him a little for the latter, and he had also taken to yelling "Language!" when some like Sapnap or Ponk would let their mouths run away, purposely or not.

He was a horned demon, sure, but the sweetest and most innocent of them all.

He was so welcome, in fact, that he made a vow to never leave the area. He had kept that promise so long now, and he therefore had no use for learning the advanced methods of travelling. He knew how to sail a small boat, that was for sure. He knew how to hoist and keep the sail in place, and he knew how to steer. For his brief trips, that was all he needed to know. Anyway, he had travelled the same route a few times now. He knew what he was doing, and where he was going.

Bad set off from the Badlands coastline half an hour after his last goodbyes to Antfrost. The stars sparkled above him, guiding him to his destination, and the sea wasn't as choppy and unforgiving as it tended to be. A gentle breeze filled his sail, and his small boat glided across the sea with a good pace. The elements seemed to be in his favour. When his course was somewhat stable, he reached up and began to rip off the red tendrils and thorned shoots gripping around his body, casting them into the tumultuous waters below.

A couple of mornings later, Bad's boat finally hit solid land. The tall trees of the nearby jungle cast long shadows over the estuary, cutting off the small island from the mainland.

Bad dragged his embarkation ashore, and shielded his eyes from the sun. The jungle screeched with growls and shrieks of unknown birds and animals stalking the

under-brush. Vines trailed down from the branches, and colourful insects buzzed around his horns and the varied species of flowers sprouting in the shade.

The demon didn't have to go very far to get to his destination; a small wooden home sat along the coastline, with a quaint little farm adjacent and a little, rickety pier jutting off into the sea. He started to pull down the sail, when a cry suddenly pierced through the air. "Bad?" He looked up. "Bad, is that you?"

He searched around for the source of the voice, until he saw a figure rush towards him from down the beach. He grinned, slightly dazzled by the blue shimmers radiating from the newcomer. "Yeah," he replied. "It's me!"

The figure picked up speed, and bolted into the demon's arms. The two of them almost fell backwards, and it was only Bad's incredible balance that saved them from a sandy fall. The hug they shared was crushing, their arms tightly wrapped around each other and heads buried into one another's shoulders.

"I was wondering when you'd come back!" the newcomer exclaimed, pulling away ever so slightly.

Bad's hand immediately went up to the other's face, cupping his cheek. His gaze turned from his initial concern to relief, his thumb rubbing over the diamonds embedded into the newcomer's tan skin. The blue gems were slowly but surely turning, regaining their former colour. The red merely left only a few smokey shadows here and there.

Skeppy leaned into his touch, and smiled his cocky, wide grin. "Lighten up, muffinhead," he chuckled, borrowing a phrase from Bad's vocabulary. "I'm fine now you're here."

"You're fine, are you?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

The demon shifted in his seat. Annoyed, Skeppy shoved his elbow into his knee, and settled back against his side. Both of them were huddled on top of a large rock, jutting out of the small bay on the other side of the small island, wrapped up in the demon's cloak and staring out at the sea. The gentle heat and screeches of the jungle behind them were no longer a disturbance, but rather a soothing, wild lullaby. The picnic basket Bad brought sat in front of them, the crumbs all that remained of the batch of blueberry muffins.

Bad's arm draped around his friend's shoulders, and his clawed hand gently gripped his arm. The touch was soft and devoid of any malicious intent. If anything, it was meant to be soothing and tender. "I'm worried for you, you know that right?"

Skeppy rolled his eyes. "Of course I do. You worry even too much."

"What is that supposed to mean?!?"

"You need to learn to chill, Bad," Skeppy told him.

The demon bristled. "I can't chill," he answered. "Not with you like this."

"Like what?"

"Sick."

"Sick?"

"Infected," Bad corrected himself.

His companion snorted. "It's leaving me alone most of the time, so you shouldn't worry about me."

Bad's alarm bells immediately started ringing, and he grabbed Skeppy by the shoulders. Sitting him up straight, he stared him dead in the eyes. "What do you mean "most of the time" ?" he asked.

His friend shrugged him off. "It's nothing to worry about," he huffed, not daring to cross his gaze.

"Skeppy, you better tell me right now—"

"Or what, Bad? Or what?"

Skeppy's insolence was frequent, but usually funny and somewhat charming. Today, however, it was driving Bad insane. "Tell me!" he ordered in a sharp tone of voice. Silence. "Please..." he added in a begging whisper. He cupped the other's cheek once again. His thin, black tail wrapped around the other's leg, tying him down in a pleading gesture. "Skeppy..."

His friend still couldn't seem to look him in the eyes. It was a shame. Bad loved those eyes. So blue and shining, like the shards of diamonds scattered across his skin.

One of Bad's claws trailed along the gems, drawing a soft tinkling sound, like little heavenly bells chiming in unison. The gentle affection the demon was giving seemed to be enough to finally make Skeppy crack. "It doesn't talk to me any more," he said. "But, I still feel its presence, sometimes..." He touched a few of the still red gems on his arm. "I still feel tired, and weak."

"Rest," Bad said. That was the only thing he could advise his friend to do on his own. The rest of the healing process could only be achieved by Bad, and Bad alone.

Skeppy frowned at him. "What do you think I've been doing on this island?" he asked. "It's the only thing I can do here."

Guilt began to gnaw at the demon. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "But it's for the best."

"When can I come home?"

"Soon," Bad promised. A promise to be sure, but he felt that he was making an empty one. "But not until you're completely healed."

"And when will that be exactly?"

He faltered. "I don't know..."

"Does that mean you're still listening to the Egg?"

The question was blunt. Too blunt for Bad's liking, and he refused to answer at first. He knew that either way, the reply would somehow infuriate Skeppy. "I am."

"Bad—"

"Please, Skeppy!" The demon suddenly grabbed his friend's hands in his. "I don't think you understand!"

Skeppy glared at him, his black hair blowing in the salty ocean air. "Enlighten me then."

"It's important! I have to listen to it! For your sake!" His grip tightened. "Everything I've done, I'm doing, or I will do is for you, and you alone."

His friend's eyes widened, and he pulled his hands away. "Why are you saying it like that?"

"Huh?"

"Bad...? What have you done...?" He trailed off, his face turning more and more mortified by the second. He was seemingly thinking the worse.

Bad couldn't say he was wrong for doing so. "Nothing that I can't fix later on," he lied.

"Who have you hurt?"

"No one."

"I... I know you're lying."

"I'm not."

"I heard the Egg too at one point, you know that! I know exactly what it wants its followers to do!"

Bad's throat tightened. "I haven't harmed a single soul yet," he said, fuelling his lie even more.

"Yet?"

"Yet, and hopefully never."

He knew however that the hopeful thought was useless. He had received orders he couldn't ignore, and missions that required manipulation, indoctrination and all out violence. But if it pleased the Egg, he'd do it.

Again, not for himself.

Not for the Egg.

For Skeppy.

It promised that his dearest friend would be left alone, and the influence it once held over him would disappear. Back when the power of the Egg was still unknown, Skeppy had bravely sacrificed himself to save Bad from getting corrupted by its strange power. The red scars and rashes all over his tanned skin and embedded diamonds were the constant reminder of that event.

Bad could never forgive Skeppy for what he had chosen to do, but he simultaneously couldn't thank him enough either. It was a horrible thought, but if he hadn't taken the demon's place, the supposed corruption he was now going through could have been much, much worse. Now, Bad was repaying the debt, in hopes that his friend would finally be freed.

No matter what it took, Bad was ready to do it to save the one he cared about the most in the whole world.

"It won't be for too long," he decided to reveal. "There's one last thing we need to do. Then, hopefully..." His white gaze darted over Skeppy's red sores and fading crimson shadows. "Hopefully, it'll all be over." He swallowed, queasy. His stomach did a number of backflips, though he managed to push them down surprisingly easily.

Skeppy still frowned, his eyes narrowing. "What's the last thing you have to do?" he wanted to know.

Bad shook his head. "I can't say any more. All you need to know is that it'll take a good while to organize."

"So, I'll be stuck here for even longer then?"

"I'm... I'm afraid so..."

His friend sighed. He stared out across the sea. "Fine, as long as you promise it won't be forever." His tone was bitter, and Bad thought it best not to reply. A silence fell soon after, both of them simply basking in the roaring of the waves against the rocks.

"Tell me..."

"Yes?"

"What are the Badlands like now?"

The demon perked up. "I... well..." He racked his brains. "Pandora's Vault has been finished and used—"

"I know," Skeppy chuckled. "You told me last time."

"Oh. Right..." He hadn't been to the jungle hideaway for so long. He had forgotten most of what he had already told his friend. "Well... errr..." He hated to circle back to the subject, but it seemed that even without the Egg's constant whispering, its influence was

always lingering. "The crimson is everywhere now. Progress has stopped." His friend mumbled something under his breath. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I said, I wish the stupid Egg just left my home alone," Skeppy repeated, much louder. Although his answer was dry and angry, Bad could sense the impending sadness in his words.

Comforting, he pulled Skeppy into his arms once again. "I know..." he whispered. The dark cloak flapped in the breeze, yet still keeping them both cosy and warm. "So do I..." Bad's tail around Skeppy's leg tightened. He couldn't let him go. He didn't want to let him go. He had to keep him safe.

He would never let him go, as long as he lived.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Torture

A week or so had passed since Sam had last talked to Quackity. The exhaustion, coupled with the strong absinthe he drank that night, had caused him to collapse the minute he entered the Vault again, and he spent a rough night at his desk. When he woke up, he didn't remember much of their conversation, or what exactly happened.

Big Q's demand to visit the prison was still, however, very much etched into his mind, and the mere thought of the implications sent a chill up his spine. He was told to wait until Quackity sent word, so he did. For a week straight, he was on edge, double checking every single security measure in Pandora's Vault, and whispering words of encouragement and reassurance to himself.

Although it was a stressful time, it managed to keep his mind off the strange incidents of the discs and compass. Tommy's music discs were now safely stored in his own enderchest, and he hadn't heard them be played since, along with the golden compass that he hid underneath the Vault's blueprints. None of it had moved, although their mysterious acquisition still puzzled him greatly.

Sam also forced himself to walk a little. Not too far, mind you; just down the Prime Path until he got to the L'Manberg junction. When he passed Tommy's home, the doors were sometimes left open, but when he saw nothing was stolen, he didn't think much of it.

Antfrost had also managed to persuade the warden to go hunting one time, and the two spent a relatively carefree afternoon galloping after the herds of deer in the Badlands. The change was welcome, and for a couple of hours, they laughed as friends. Not as co-leaders of a faction, nor as battle-hardy warriors, but as the friends they were before the Badlands, before Pandora's Vault, before the Eggpire. That was, of course, until Ant started to coo over the supposed beauty of the Egg's tendrils. After agreeing reluctantly, Sam made a hasty exit.

One day, a magnificent hawk soared over the prison, and dropped a note right at Sam's feet, just as he was inspecting the outside on the dark, pebbled island his creation sat on. He read it, and immediately turned back the way he came, and rowed back across the channel.

An hour or two later, Quackity stepped into the Vault. He smiled. "Hello, Sam."

With a silent nod, Sam invited him to sign the contracts he had laid out on the top of the desk. "I need you to read these out loud," he asked his friend.

He watched as Quackity peered at the papers, then smiled, and began to read them at the top of his voice. "I assume all of the risks of visiting the holding cell, including by way of example and not limitation, any risks that may arise from negligence or carelessness on the part of the prison guards, prisoners misbehaving, from dangerous or defective equipment or property owned, maintained or controlled by the prison guards." "He took a breath. "I certify that I waive, release, and discharge the prison from any and all liability, including but not limited to, death, disability, personal injury, property damage, property theft, or actions of any kind which may hereafter occur to me, including my travelling to and from visiting the Prisoner. Written name, then sign." "Quackity chuckled lightly. "Negligence? From you? That'll be the day..."

The warden tensed up. "Do what it says and keep reading," he demanded. Big Q was on *his* land now, and he'd make him listen and obey, or another life would possibly be forfeited.

Snatching up the quill he was offered, Quackity signed his name, before picking up the second paper. He cleared his throat. "In the event that a prisoner is to escape during my visit, or after my visit because of my actions, I hereby give permission for any individual to hunt me down and kill me until I am completely dead. In the event of security protocol taking place while I am within the bounds of the maximum security cell, I hereby acknowledge that I could potentially be locked within the cell for up to seven days, or until the security issue is resolved." "

As he read the words, Sam's throat tightened.

"Sam, are you alright?"

"Just sign the damn thing and give it back," he growled, his expression darkening.

Quietly, his business partner complied, and pushed the paper back across the desk. Sam glanced at it briefly, checking it was signed, and then shoved them into a drawer. He stood up.

"Do you recognize that I, Sam, am the ultimate authority on the grounds of this prison, and whatever I say goes?"

It was the deciding question he asked everyone. It was one that never sounded quite right when written down on paper, so he kept it vocal. The few visitors that had entered the Vault would stare up at the golden, imposing giant who rose before them, their eyes wide with terror and their throats tight. They would nod quickly, and breathe out in relief when the warden would move on with the entry protocols. Their reply must have got them on his good side.

Tommy himself, at first, reacted like all the others did, until he started to get to know Sam. Afterwards, he'd salute with a click of his tongue and an upbeat exclamation of, "Sure thing, king!" It was too optimistic and careless of an answer for the warden, for the Vault. How Sam wished he could hear that voice again.

Big Q's reaction was sinister. Much more sinister than Sam expected it to be. He raised an eyebrow, letting the question sink in, then let his crooked smile do the rest of the talking. "Of course I do," he replied, his tone dark. The reply was courteous, but the glint in his sharp eyes told the warden a whole other story.

He was being mocked.

Sam bristled. "If you're not going to take this seriously, I suggest you leave." He gestured to the portal, still lit and beckoning.

"Oh, but I am taking this seriously, Sam," Quackity hummed, clearly unfazed by the warden's growing annoyance.

"You're mocking me."

"I'm used to the lighter mood of The Strip. Forgive me if I appear too jovial for your liking."

Even the way he was talking made Sam grit his teeth, so close to throwing him out. In the end, he sighed, and gestured to a doorway on the left side of the entrance hall. "Put all your stuff in the locker," he grumbled, his mask muffling his words.

"Of course," Big Q replied. Before going off the way Sam had pointed at, he walked up to the desk and slammed something down where the contracts once lay. "Everything except this, as agreed."

Sam stared down at the object. It was a small, silver adorned switch-blade. He blinked at it for a few moments.

"Sam? Is everything alright?"

"Yes," he answered, regaining his bearings. With slightly trembling fingers, he pocketed the blade. "I'll carry it through the prison, and I'll return it once we're at the holding cell."

"That's fine by me." Quackity smirked again, and walked off, whistling a high-spirited melody that turned the prison's surroundings even more dark and chilling.

The journey through the rest of the prison was the most tense and terrifying one Sam had ever made. Every sound was too loud. Every step was heavy, and filled with dread. Sam's breath was shallow, and raspy, thankfully hidden quite well by his gas-mask. His mouth was dry, and his eyes kept darting nervously around him. Every subtle creak, groan or thud made him jump, and panic. The long, dark hallways and small passages seemed to close in around him. He wanted to scream.

This was the first visit since Tommy's death.

This was the first one Sam had allowed, and he felt sick to his stomach.

Anything and everything could go wrong, and he couldn't live with another death on his conscience.

Quackity, in stark contrast to the warden, was remarkably calm. He walked behind Sam, hands behind his back, and his head held high. His grin was calm and relaxed, as were his mannerisms. He obeyed Sam's orders to the letter. He followed every protocol and every security check with no whining, comments or attitude.

He was the perfect visitor. He was nothing like the Quackity who used to help run Manberg at President Schlatt's side.

At that time, Sam had only just returned to the Greater SMP, and was understandably startled by all the changes. He met up with his old friends, got to know the new factions, and started a new life. A life that was carefully wired and built like his redstone machines, and one that ultimately brought him to Schlatt's attention.

During that single meeting, Big Q was the brightest ray of sun Sam had ever seen. He smiled wildly, he cracked jokes, and was overall the friendliest member of the cabinet by far. When years later, Quackity approached the warden with a new project, Las Nevadas, Sam was quick to sign on a partnership, if only to work with someone he knew was fun and outgoing.

Big Q had changed drastically. And as Sam watched him make his way through the Vault, he knew that there was no going back for his friend.

It felt like years before they finally reached the holding cell, and years more for Sam to finally get the lava wall to drain. As it started to thin, Quackity held out his hand.

Sam, against his better judgement, handed him the switch-blade.

Big Q put it in his pocket. "Can't spoil what's going to happen before it does, can we?" he chuckled lightly.

The warden hated the way he phrased it. Spoil. Like someone would spoil a good book, or the end of a bedtime story. This was nothing like a child's bedtime story. This was real life. This was a nightmare.

Sam wouldn't let the visitor say anything more. "Stand still, face forwards, and keep quiet," he ordered.

Quackity bowed his head, respectful. "Of course." He turned back, but not before shooting his friend a crooked grin, clearly amused by his discomfort. "Are you always this jumpy and on edge in the prison?"

Sam's fist tightened around his trident. He stared straight ahead. "I told you to keep quiet," he growled under his breath.

"Right, yes."

Almost on cue, the fiery curtain disappeared, and the holding cell was revealed. The warden turned his head, and looked over the chasm.

Dream stared back at him, his expression puzzled. It was certainly a change from his usual, eerily grinning face he wore whenever he was in Sam's presence; the grin of a monster who just ate an entire family, and was waiting for someone to find out. The criminal's emerald green eyes panned from the warden to Quackity. "A visitor?" he questioned, his eyes narrowing.

Sam wondered if Dream knew something was going to happen. He spoke. "Yes, a visitor, Dream. You've had them before."

"I killed the last one," the prisoner reminded him. It was such a strange answer; it was as if he was trying to deter Big Q from wanting to cross, and Sam from letting him do so.

Before the warden could retort, Quackity took the lead. "Listen Dream, I'm here to ask you something." He held up his hands, possibly to show that he wasn't a threat. Sam eyed the bulge in his back pocket. The knife was very visible when one knew where to look.

The prisoner stayed silent, then took a step back. "Alright then, Sam. Send him across."

As if Dream had any choice in the matter.

Sam readied his hand around the lever. "Make sure to walk with the bridge, Quackity," he warned his friend, and pulled it down.

The bridge began to move, and make its way across the lava. Neither Big Q's smile nor his balance faltered during the journey, and before they knew it, he had stepped out into the obsidian cell, with Dream eyeing his every movement.

Once safely arrived, Big Q looked back. "You can leave us now, Sam," he said.

Sam nodded, and pulled down the lava again. He knew he wouldn't leave them. He couldn't leave them, unless of course something like another security issue popped up again. For the sake of his sanity, he prayed that it wouldn't happen. Never again.

He stayed put, standing on the other side of the lava, back straight and as still as a statue. He waited. The popping and bubbling of the fiery curtain dulled most of the conversation on the other side. The voices were muffled, like a droning background noise.

Sam still listened.

Suddenly, one of the two voices started to scream. "SAM! SAM!"

It was desperate. It was terrified.

It was Dream.

Quackity's voice raised ever so slightly. "Dream, I warned you—"

"SAAAAAM!"

Sam blocked it out. The screams were so loud that he reckoned even people on the mainland could hear them. He hoped they couldn't.

But the screaming of his name... That's what haunted him the most.

"*SAM! SAAAM! LET ME OUT!*" The memory of a younger voice returned to torment his mind. "*YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME IN HERE!*"

But Sam could, and he did, even when Tommy called. It was the worst mistake of his life. As Dream kept calling for his help, to drag the madman with the knife off him, Sam still didn't move. He wouldn't let anyone out this time, not until Big Q's job was done. The cycle had repeated.

Only this time, if anything was to go wrong, Sam would feel no remorse.

Everything hurt.

The prisoner was used to pain. He had battled so many enemies, and had sustained so many injuries in the process. His scarred body was a constant reminder of his wars, and his victories that came along with them. But this was unlike anything Dream had ever even imagined. Hurt was such an underwhelming word for what he felt at that moment.

It was agony.

His torturer was relentless, and brutal. Quackity's missing, golden teeth glinted high above him as his knife struck again and again, slicing at his skin. The cuts he left were those of someone who knew that they were doing, intricate and deliberate. They weren't

deep enough to make him bleed to death, but they were still dealt perfectly, allowing him to suffer pain far stronger than anything he had ever felt before.

His throat was raw from yelling so loud, calling for help that was merely a small chasm away, yet it was help that never arrived, nor acknowledged what was happening. Some warden Sam was. The attacks were punctuated by brief yells and demands, with Dream replying with only denial.

As much as he was hurting, he would not let Quackity have the satisfaction of getting him to crack. He wasn't going to kill him, that much was clear; the injuries he was inflicting were painful, but not ones that would murder him. He'd suffer, but he wouldn't die. Since Dream was on his last life, the prospect of death was closer than he had ever imagined it to be.

After a while, the slashing stopped. Crouching in a corner of his cell, all Dream could hear was his own, raspy breath. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dream." His torturer's voice sounded calm and composed at first, but when listening closer, pure anger and hatred was there, tainting his tone like bloodstains.

With that, Big Q took his leave. The bridge was pulled back. The lava encased his cell once more. But Dream did not dare move, until he was certain he was alone. Until he was certain he was safe. He lowered his arms from his head – where he had kept them as fickle armour – and was immediately shot through by agony.

It felt like every surface of his body was torn and shredded, and every movement pinched and pulled at the cuts in his skin, opening them wide open and closing them violently. His tattered prison uniform was nothing more than rags, clinging onto their loose seams and his mutilated body. Small droplets of blood began to form on a few of the splices. He couldn't even wince without his whole face being on fire. Gritting his teeth, Dream leaned against the wall, seating himself back into his normal position.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Dream."

So, this was going to be a regular thing, was it?

Dream was a warrior. A strong, proud and dangerous one, but he was also sensible, and smart. Way smarter than many realized. He knew he couldn't fight back against Quackity, even when he had nothing but a small switch-blade in his possession. Being so weak from his time in the Vault, his bones wouldn't have the power to so much as knock his attacker over without snapping like twigs.

All he could do was defend himself, and keep his mouth shut.

Withholding the information Quackity was striving to pry out of him was the best action he could take, and one that would ultimately end with a victory for him every time, except if he'd decide to surrender. That wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Dream never surrendered.

He didn't know how long he stayed there, his emerald eyes half closed and unseeing. He was lost in his thoughts of pain and anger, and betrayal. He didn't hear the creaks of the redstone machines, he didn't see the lava curtain fall again, and he didn't realize someone had entered his cell until a bowl was pressed to his dry, bleeding lips.

"Drink," a muffled voice ordered, its tone harsh and cold.

The prisoner didn't have the strength or the will to obey, and instead merely parted his mouth ever so slightly. Deliciously cold water cascaded down his throat, a small droplet or two escaping out of the corner of his mouth. When the bowl was taken away, he said nothing. His eyes opened.

The Warden stared back at him.

The Warden, who had refused to answer his calls of agony. The Warden, who had allowed Quackity to bring a weapon with him into the holding cell. The Warden, who was very likely an accomplice to the whole scheme put in place, and his apparent daily torture. The Warden, who had let a visitor die in his own prison.

The Warden, who was not fit for the job he was given.

A warm, damp cloth gently touched Dream's forehead and without a single second of hesitation or word, he brushed the hand away. After a second, the cloth tried again, only to be met with the same response as the first time. After the third attempt – and the third similar reaction – Sam grabbed his chin with a strong, crushing grip, and yanked his head up to look at him.

Unable to move, Dream was forced to endure the supposed kindness he was being shown. Wordlessly, Sam dabbed the cuts and injuries on his face, being as soft and gentle as he could, save for the iron grip on his jaw. The prisoner held his jailer's gaze for a long time, searching his eyes for any trace of remorse, or an apology for what he had to endure.

Instead, he found only a cold stare, filled with the hatred he had been subjected to ever since he had been welcomed to the Vault for his indefinite stay. "Why?" he managed to push out, his cheekbones and chin crushed.

He didn't want to elaborate further. Sam was also a smart man; he knew exactly what he was talking about. Or so he thought.

"Because we don't need you to die," Sam replied, his tone bitter. As soft were his mannerisms while nursing his cuts, he was doing it with a certain reluctance. That said, he knew Quackity certainly wouldn't have asked Sam to take care of him. It was still probably the warden's own decision.

That's not what Dream meant by his question, though.

Why?

Why was Sam a part of this? Why had he *chosen* to be a part of this?

As much as he was strict in his role as the guardian of Pandora's Vault, he was still human at heart. Condoning torture was something else. It was inhumane. Even Dream knew that, and Dream was branded the most dangerous and brutal villain to have ever walked the realms and beyond.

Sam didn't read minds, however, so didn't answer his real question. He continued nursing the criminal's face, until there was no warm water left to do so. Then, he finally let go of his jaw. The warden stood up, gathered up the empty bowls and the rag, and prepared to leave. "There's a new uniform for you," he said, gesturing to a neatly folded pile of orange clothing down on the floor.

The ragged, stained uniform Dream wore now reeked, and was reduced to nothing more than ribbons after Big Q's knife made quick work of it to reach the skin underneath. He didn't know exactly how long he had been stuck inside Pandora's Vault, although he had good reason to believe it was well over a year now. Over all this time, he hadn't changed his clothes once.

The new uniform was a godsend. He was about to immediately reach for it, when he noticed something sitting on top of the pile.

It was a bunch of pale yellow roses, shaded with orange shadows in the dim glow of the cell. Dream was confused, and looked from the flowers up to Sam again.

The warden shrugged. "They were addressed to you, and were left outside the prison's entrance."

From the slight curled and withered tips of the petals, and the absence of thorns on the stems, the warden must have kept them a couple of days, making sure they were harmless enough to be given to the crafty criminal in the cell.

Dream frowned. "Who—"

"I don't know," Sam was quick to interrupt him. "And I honestly don't care."

George.

That was Dream's first thought.

The roses smelled so sweet, and finally managed to free Dream's nose from the burning smell of the lava, and the stench of his unclean self. He picked up the bouquet, and fumbled with the tag around it. He accidentally cut his thumb as he steadied it, adding one more cut to the growing collection. He read the four letter name on it.

CLAY

The "L" was backwards, and the handwriting was incredibly shaky and stiff. Inexperienced, one might say. Dream recognized it immediately. The unstable handwriting together with the simple fact that only someone innocent and well meaning enough would ever consider sending flowers to a hardened criminal told him exactly who was responsible.

The being who had left these at the Vault was no longer a mystery, and as the prisoner watched Sam leave the holding cell, he smiled to himself.

"You *should* care about who the sender is, Sam," he smirked, uttering the words under his breath. "Because he's back, and you don't even realize it."

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Hand Of Friendship

Although he was no longer bound to the walls of Pandora's Vault, Tommy was still alone. At least, he was most of the time. In the days that followed, he settled into a

routine. He would get up, walk outside, and spend the daylight hours sitting on the wooden bench at the edge of the cliff. It was just him, the silent jukebox, and the imposing oak tree casting its shade over the grassy slope.

He would hear the walkers and riders up on the Prime Path, but he took no notice of them, and they took no notice of him either. When the sun set over the hills and the stars started to peek through the ether, Tommy would make his way back to the dirt house in the hill, where he'd lie down in the unmade bed. He didn't sleep. He would stare up at the ceiling, watching the worms and burrowing insects dig their little holes, right up until dawn broke.

Then, he'd return to the bench, and repeat the cycle over and over again. It was repetitive, and it might have been considered mundane. Tommy wouldn't agree. He liked the normality of it all, not that he knew what normality was. He liked the rays of sun soaking through his translucent body. He liked the rough wood of the bench, although it sent shivers – and often sparks of pain – up his arms when he moved them. He liked the gentle chime of the leaves above him, and the scratching of the bark whenever a bird or squirrel perched on them.

He would just sit there, and let it all sink in. That's all he did; his mind clear, his emotions in check, and his body attentive.

"Do you remember anything?" Ghostbur would ask, on his few visits to Tommy.

No, no he didn't. In fact, he didn't even try to, in any way. The discs had given him back a few glimpses of his past memories, but they were enough for him. He wished he could stay in his little daily loop forever. That was the first time he felt something relative to pure joy.

But Ghostbur was persistent. In between the songs he happily strummed on the guitar, he would pester Tommy into making an effort to remember. He would drag him on short walks around the Greater SMP, showing off the landmarks and trying to jog his memory. It didn't work, although it started to break a bit of Tommy's usual routine.

It was on one of these strolls that Tommy stumbled upon a bush of yellow roses. He picked a few, and left them near Pandora's Vault, addressed to his friend inside. He hoped they had reached their destination by now. Occasionally, he'd decide to leave the bench on his own, and take a small walk down the lane to a red and white building over yonder, stretching high into the sky. It reminded him of the colours of his shirt.

The building was interesting, sure, but what happened below it even more so. People would bustle in and out of it all the time, and with no rest. No two looked the same, and Tommy liked that. Over there, an anthropomorphic couple made up of a ginger cat and a yellow duck left through the doors, hand in hand, happy expressions on their faces and continued down the Prime Path on foot. Coming into the building was an important looking character in a suit, trailed by servants carrying his luggage. Carriages and steeds of different shapes and colours would pull up next to the large, double doors, let their owners dismount, then be lead around the back to the stables.

Tommy liked to sit in the shade of a nearby tree, and watch. For hours on end, he'd sit and stare at the travellers. He wondered about their names, and their stories. Whatever he could to avoid thinking about his own. Today was a day like many others.

Tommy was busy watching the building and its noisy and bustling inhabitants. The tree he sat under rustled above him. The hooves of the horses, and the pigs, and the other steeds clattered against the Prime Path, gently clopping as they were taken around the back. Ringing laughter filled his ears, and he sighed. Everything was so peaceful. Even his aching body had decided to give him a rest. He closed his eyes, and let the gentle sounds flow through him.

That was until someone disturbed him. "Hello, Tommy."

The ghost opened his eyes, and immediately found the source of the voice. He had to look up quite high to finally cross the figure's gaze. Standing, merely a few steps in front of him, was someone he didn't expect, least of all considering his previous actions and reactions.

Ranboo.

Or, at least, that was what Ghostbur called him.

The last time they had seen each other, Ranboo had run away. He had been terrified by Tommy's presence. The newcomer took a tentative step closer. "H-How are you?" His voice was a little strained, the slight nervousness in it apparent.

The ghost shrugged. He couldn't answer him, in more ways than one. He wasn't alright, yet he wasn't miserable either. He just felt... numb. Burnt out.

"Oh, you can't... I mean, maybe you don't want to..." Ranboo lingered for a while, before looking down at the hands he was anxiously fiddling together. "I'm a little

nervous about this," he said, letting out a small chuckle. "I know our last meeting wasn't really... friendly."

Tommy knew what he meant, but one question kept buzzing around his head.

Why did Ranboo come back, if he was so scared of the phantom? He couldn't ask, and he had a feeling that even if he did, Ranboo wouldn't answer him.

"You're quiet," the newcomer noted, before raising his hands in defence. "That's fine. I can be a little quiet myself sometimes. Helps me think."

Tommy didn't really know if that was meant to be a compliment or not. He took a closer look at Ranboo.

He was tall, that much was certain. Tall and lanky, with long limbs. He was almost unstable with them, like the foals Tommy would see gallivant around in the valley below his bench. All limbs, very little balance. His skin was a splattered duality of black and white, like an abstract painting of some sort. Small specks drew odd patterns on his cheeks. They almost made Tommy want to trace them with his finger, and connect the dots like some sort of puzzle. Perhaps even a puzzle that could make him think, and remember. He also had mismatched eyes, the colours of bright, sparkling gems. A long, dark blue cloak sat, lopsided, around his shoulders, the collar of his shirt peeking out from the thick, white fur. Ranboo's movements were sharp and swift. From the way he fiddled with his fingers to the way his long pointed ears flickered, everything was done with some sort of anxiety and shyness.

He didn't really know what to think of Ranboo. He was strange, yet so was Tommy, so he really couldn't fault him for that.

"OI!" A sudden call startled them, and they looked up at the building.

Someone was hanging out of one of the windows on the first floor, gesturing to the scene down below. Tommy immediately backed into the shadow of the tree, eyes wide and somewhat frightened. He briefly glanced at Ranboo, expecting him to do the same thing, especially considering his current state.

But to his surprise, he instead squared up, and faced the figure at the window. "What?" he yelled back, shielding his green and red eyes from the blinding sun.

The stranger leaned forwards. Tommy expected a long rope of hair to cascade out as well, and for Ranboo to start climbing it. He didn't know why; it just seemed fitting. It

would have been, if the stranger had any hair. In fact, he was very much bald. His eyes were narrowed behind his red and blue tinted glasses, and his fingers were gripping the windowsill so tightly that they were turning white.

"You've got to pay to linger 'ere!" he yelled back at Ranboo.

The hybrid stood his ground. "That's ridiculous!" he exclaimed. "I'm not even a customer!"

"Rules are rules, Mr Boo! I'm running a thriving business, not a public park!"

Tommy watched as Ranboo's hands balled into fists, his long fingers digging into his palms. His thin tail whipped back and forth, angry. "Mr Manifold," he spat, seething with fury. "The only reason you have that "thriving" business of yours is because you stole it out from under a dead man's feet!"

"Stole?" Mr Manifold spluttered, clearly indignant. "I didn't steal anything! Legally, it's mine. He would have wanted me to have it."

"Legally?! He didn't even have time to write his will!"

"That doesn't change anything!"

Ranboo stayed silent for a brief moment, before he turned back to the ghost. "C'mon, Tommy," he whispered, making sure to keep his tone as low as possible. "Let's leave." He raised his voice, and shot a murderous gaze up to the man at the window. "Enjoy it while you can, Jack," he said. Tommy took that as a threat.

But Jack Manifold didn't seem to want to back down. "If you set foot 'ere ever again, I'll have you arrested!" he swore.

"Arrested? What makes you think Sam will back you up?"

The phantom watched as Jack paused, and struggled to find his words. With a scowl and a small, sharp curse thrown Ranboo's way, he shut the window with a bang.

"That felt good," Ranboo admitted, after a few seconds of silence where he caught his breath. Tommy could hear the small rasp in his voice, strained after yelling so loudly. The ghost, although he knew it was nothing compared to the pain in his own throat, sympathized with the hybrid's struggle. Ranboo turned around, and faced the ghost again. "Here's an idea; why don't you go and haunt Jack Manifold? That would be hilarious."

Tommy immediately shook his head. He knew what haunting was. He knew that moving items, breaking things or doing anything out of the ordinary – especially since he was practically invisible – could be terrifying. And the look in both Ranboo and Sam's eyes when they first saw either him or the items he had fiddled with wasn't something he'd wish to see on anyone else. No matter how obnoxious or greedy they were, of which his first glimpse of Jack Manifold showed that he was clearly both.

Ranboo's small, amused smile faltered, and turned once more to the nervous, anxious expression he had when he first started talking to Tommy. "That's alright," he said, still trying to keep a somewhat upbeat tone of voice. "I was just joking..." His hands started to fiddle with the silver clasp holding his thick, arctic cloak together.

Tommy could tell that he didn't know what to say, or do, and the ghost himself didn't know how to reassure him. They were both at an impasse. The silence that fell between them was deafening, broken only by the footsteps around the large building and the furtive looks Ranboo occasionally cast towards the phantom, along with his small attempts at uttering something, only to back down immediately after.

"As much as Jack is a bit of an idiot," the hybrid finally managed to say. "He's right. Maybe we should leave." After another hesitation, he held out his hand.

Tommy stared at it.

It was black like other parts of his body, with small specks of white that reminded him of the starry nights he'd manage to glimpse through the cracked oak doors. His nails were a little sharp, like claws, and a few were chipped and broken. Burn scars from something liquid were also dashed across his palm. It was a little frightening. But it was held out in friendship, and Tommy liked that.

He held Ranboo's hand.

Well, Ranboo didn't expect his day to go like this. Getting over the first image of Tommy's ghost was hard, and took him a while. It also took a little outside help, from the most unlikely of places. It all started with a particularly big spider.

Not as colossal as the ones that lurked in the dark caves and forests, and could take down a warrior with a single bite of their poisonous fangs, but still big enough to make Ranboo scream.

Sapnap had rushed to the hybrid's shack at the sound, and found him pointing his sword at the black mass in the corner. With a tut, the fire warrior gently let the small terror crawl onto his hand, and threw him out the door.

"The poor thing is probably more scared of you than you are of it," Sapnap smirked afterwards.

It was a light-hearted tease, but Ranboo thought deeply about what Sapnap had said, and he came to a conclusion. He decided to go find Tommy's ghost, and confront his fears. It was also an opportunity to show the phantom that he wasn't a threat to him.

When he finally found the ghost outside the Big Innit— sorry, Big Manifold Hotel, he couldn't react straight away. The bruises and the cuts were frightening, a constant, gruesome reminder of the fate that had befallen the poor boy. The mere thought of the pain he must have endured in his final moments was enough to make the hybrid want to scream and wail.

But apart from the injuries, there was something else about the ghost that had haunted Ranboo; his eyes. White and almost unseeing, they still conveyed so much emotion when his gaze crossed them. That first day a week or so ago when they met on the Prime Path, with Ghostbur waving from afar and Friend joyfully trotting alongside him, Ranboo had stared into those eyes. The fear and the shock in them chilled him right down to his core, and was a good part of the reason he chose to run. Today, those eyes were staring at him once again, but this time, filled with curiosity and intrigue.

Their impromptu walk had led them to skirt the borders of the Badlands and the Greater SMP, ducking between the parasitic tendrils that had taken no notice of the delimitations between the territories.

They arched above them, surprisingly still, as if they were made of red marble, and hanging like large ocean waves hanging in suspension, frozen in time. Glowing specks of orange pollen and spores drifted through the air, latching onto the fur of Ranboo's cloak and attempting to fly into his nostrils. The hybrid would splutter and choke, taking particular care to clean his windpipes of the infectious Egg's growths.

Ranboo himself wasn't the only one he had to worry about. Walking with Tommy's ghost was exactly like taking a stroll with a small child. Like a magnet, he was drawn to the crimson vines, dragging his pale fingers across the thorns and flowers. Ranboo would have to quickly rush and pull him away from them, only to have him try and touch another tendril on the other side. It was a relentless game of cat and mouse, and it quickly exhausted Ranboo.

"Tommy, please," he had to eventually say, out of breath and tired. "Don't go near those. They're dangerous."

But of course, did Tommy take any notice?

That seemed to be the problem; Tommy was clearly aware of his supernatural predicament. He didn't have any sense of self-preservation. Perhaps that didn't exactly differ from what Tommy used to be like... when he was alive, that is. The only difference was that the old Tommy was stupidly brave, but out of loyalty and duty. This new Tommy was touching the Egg's growths simply out of curiosity.

An innocent curiosity.

A child's innocence.

But then again, curiosity killed the cat, they all said. Or in this case, the cat might quickly become the ghost if the Egg's power managed to stretch beyond the living organisms it infected. Eventually, Ranboo knew that his attempts at keeping the phantom in check were futile, and instead kept walking, gathering his thoughts.

He was shaken every time he glanced at the ghost, but he also simply did not know what to say. What could you say to someone who clearly couldn't answer you back, or one that clearly couldn't remember anything?

Funnily enough, from that question alone, Ranboo got an idea. "It's alright if you don't remember anything," he began, waiting for his companion to listen to him. When Tommy eventually drew his gaze from the crimson tendrils, he continued. "You're not the first one to have memory problems."

He watched as the phantom tilted his head, puzzled. He remained completely silent, his eyes wide, listening carefully. It was somewhat unsettling. Ranboo was almost expecting an exclamation of "Yeah, your memory is shit man, thanks for finally noticing." Perhaps even one of the multiple, teasing nicknames he'd give him, such as the likes of "Ranboob".

He wasn't exactly expecting it; he was *missing* it.

Anything that could tell Ranboo that the old Tommy – the *living* Tommy – was still in there, something much substantial than the golden locks of matted hair and the red and white, stained shirt he wore. Something real and genuine in this shell of a phantom.

Desperate to get his eyes and mind off his darker thoughts, Ranboo dug around in his pockets, and pulled out a journal. He stared at it for a while, forehead creased in confusion. It took him a while to finally remember why this memory book looked brand new, and why the pages were all blank. He handed it to the phantom. "You could write in this, if you want," he suggested, forcing out a smile as the ghost inspected his present. "I always find writing things down helps me keep track of my memories. Maybe you should try that."

He didn't know exactly what he was doing by giving away the book. Anyway, he could read Tommy's face surprisingly well. Maybe it was the fact that Michael was a child too, so Ranboo got used to reading signs, however subtle they were. Tommy was so childlike, and the disappointment and ungratefulness on his face didn't escape the hybrid.

Ranboo reached up, scratching the back of his head. His fingers tangled into the longer black and white hair behind his neck, and he tugged on it, gently. His usual, nervous and embarrassed responses were coming back to him. "I mean, only if you want to use it," he pressed to add, letting out a nervous chuckle. "It's not a requirement or anything. I know how you feel about rules, and I..."

This is ridiculous.

Ranboo knew he was making a fool out of himself, and was trying too hard to do something, anything, to try and make the situation he was in normal. That was the problem. Nothing about this situation was *normal*.

Ranboo took a deep breath. "Look, Tommy," he said, watching as the phantom began to flip through the journal, seemingly bored. "I'm not good with encounters in general, and this—" He gestured to them both. "Whatever is going on here is something I've never done before. I've never spoken to the ghost of one of my friends before... Do you know how terrifying it is?"

Did Ranboo mean for it to turn into some sort of vent about his inner crisis? Was Tommy his therapist? No, but he continued anyway.

His hand gripped his hair, much tighter now. So tight in fact, that he thought he was going to rip it clean off. He screwed his eyes shut, unable to face Tommy's ghostly apparition. "You have no idea how sorry I am," he mumbled under his breath. "So sorry, about everything that happened, about everything you've been through... I can't look at you because I can't bear to see what happened to you..." He choked, and sniffled. "I'm sorry Tommy, but I can't... I can't... I can't... I—"

"Can't what?"

When the new voice spoke up, Ranboo immediately spun around. He automatically made a step to conceal the ghost – and thus what would look like a floating journal for those who couldn't see him – behind his back. With his palms, he made sure to dry his eyes, wincing from the burning tears now adding to the scars on his hands. Blinking through them, he caught sight of two figures standing a few meters away from him and the phantom, in the shadow of one of the large tendril arches. The spores drifted towards them, latching onto their fur and skin. They made no move to brush them off.

Ranboo tried to hide Tommy even more. "I'm sorry," he said as a brief greeting. "I didn't realize we were trespassing on your land. We'll leave."

"We?"

"I," the hybrid quickly corrected himself. "Just me." He sighed. "I'm sorry, it's been... it's been a long day... I just fancied a walk, and..." He trailed off.

He was tired. He was exhausted. But his heart and adrenaline were also pumping from the fear of the ghost being seen. He didn't know why; very few seemed to see him either. Anyway, what was so dangerous about Tommy being seen? It was established that he had no sense of self-preservation. That said, he was remarkably still, Ranboo could feel that, and he was relieved.

"A walk?" the first of the two newcomers piped up again. He lifted a hand to his face, pensive. "A calming pastime, isn't it?"

Ranboo didn't know how to respond.

"I would have thought you'd be a lot more panicked and vigilant," he continued.

The hybrid was confused. "Vigilant? Panicked? I don't see what you mean..."

"Well..." The newcomer produced a leather journal, seemingly out of nowhere. "I'm sure you wouldn't have wanted to leave this lying around in the open, would you?"

Ranboo's mouth went dry, and his lips parted ever so slightly.

There was his original memory book – the one he thought he had lost forever, stained cover and all – now in the clutches of one of the last group of people he would ever want it to be in. Ranboo's mismatched eyes panned from the two members of the Eggpire, and the book. Dread now plagued every breath he took, and every chill and

tremble felt like a wave of frozen water washing over him. With a shaking, high-pitched voice, he spoke.

"How... How did you get that...?"

Chapter Twenty-Six: Blackmail

Bad glanced at the book he held. "Oh, this?" he asked, surprised. He grinned. "It doesn't matter where we found it."

But it did. It mattered to Ranboo, so much so that it scared him. The demon's acting didn't fool him. All thoughts of Tommy's phantom faded from his mind. Trying to compose himself, he reached out his hand, cursing as it trembled. "I lost it a while ago," he gulped, taking a step forward. "I'd like to have it back." Pause. "Please," he added as a polite afterthought.

"Here you go then."

Now, Ranboo had expected everything, every outcome possible for his current predicament; screams, shouts, fights. The one where Bad actually complied and gave him the journal, however, was not one that he had anticipated.

He hesitated before taking it from the demon's clawed grasp, searching his face for any sign of malice. If there were any, Ranboo was too puzzled to find them, or Bad had simply learned to hide them too well. Antfrost as well. Ranboo even inspected the book, making sure no unwanted substances had graced its cover. As an extra precaution, he brushed it off when he got it back, getting rid of any Egg spores that might have drifted onto it.

"Thank you," he finally breathed, relieved. With the journal back in his possession, he finally felt complete again.

Bad didn't move, except to drop his outstretched hand. "I have to say, Ranboo," he began, casting a brief look at his cat companion. "It was an interesting read."

The hybrid briefly froze, taking in what he said. *An interesting read*. It didn't take a genius to know from that comment that his memory book had been flipped through,

and quite likely thoroughly. He wasn't too worried at first, and chose to respond as calmly as possible.

"Well," he replied, clearing his throat. "I'm sure the multiple entries about farming and gardening were definitely of use to you." He gestured to the tendrils around them. "You seem to have a little growth problem yourself."

From the reaction he got, he knew that he had struck some sort of nerve. Ant's ears flattened against his scalp, and one of his paws wrapped itself protectively around the end of a crimson tendril, followed by a loud hiss of displeasure that was as loud and as vicious as a cobra's.

Bad on the other hand remained remarkably composed, only lightly brushing the large ruby pendant hanging around his neck, as if to silence something raging inside it. The sharp thorns around his horns seemed to tighten as well, at least from the slight wince Bad's face twisted into. The demon continued, suddenly defensive. "Those aren't the parts we're talking about," he said.

Of course they weren't. Ranboo wasn't stupid. He knew Bad had no real interest in botany or agriculture. He was more likely referring to some of the first few entries, the more detailed ones describing his first few days in Tubbo's new L'Manberg, and his growing place in the cabinet there. Even Ranboo liked to read those passages again, from time to time. Those passages were the only traces left of much simpler times, like gentle bedtime stories that could lull him off into the most pleasant of dreams, carefree and peaceful.

If anything, Bad was talking about those pages. Right? That was what Ranboo thought before Bad snapped his fingers, and Antfrost passed him a large stack of papers from his satchel.

The demon held them out to the hybrid. "We're talking about these entries."

Shooting the Eggpire a strange look, he took the papers, and began to skim the first few sentences. The first words were enough to make him step back in fear.

It was...

No...

They... they couldn't have...

It...

"I guess it's a good thing that Ant knows how to translate Ender, right?" Bad piped up, moving closer to Ranboo, like a predator circling its prey.

The hybrid took a breath, and chose to shake his head. "I didn't write any of this," he tried to lie. "You're mistaken."

But the damage had already been done. His horrified reactions had told the Eggpire everything, and he knew any attempt at denying anything would prove fruitless. He never really read any of the coded passages once he wrote them. What was done in the enderwalk state would stay in the enderwalk state, and since he would forget so much, he wouldn't remember what he had done. That was fine by him, by all means. It was, until now.

Bad sauntered towards him, and his clawed fingers grabbed one of the other sheets of paper, brushing over a small paragraph. "This one in particular caught our interest."

Ranboo didn't dare look down at first, still frozen with shock and terror. Eventually, he started to read what was written down. He sucked in a shaky breath.

Betrayal.

Betrayal was the only word that came to him.

I tried to free Him.

He calls to me from behind the black walls. I can feel it. I can almost hear His pleas and desperation. I know He doesn't cry and He doesn't ask for help. He aids others but expects no one to help Him. I went against his word.

I climbed up to the top of Pandora's Vault and attempted to blow an escape down to his cell. The walls are too thick and the explosion did very little to damage the prison. The Warden came to investigate before I could try again. I had to leave the scene. I have failed Him. I have failed the mission. He taught me to take every opportunity. I should have shot the Warden as soon as I saw him, but I didn't.

I ran. I ran like a coward.

As a punishment for my fearful retreat, I poured a bucketful of water over my head. It hurt, but it was well deserved. He'd be pleased by my devotion to his teachings, if not by today's cowardice.

Betrayal. Blame where it was due, and the worst stab of guilt he had ever felt before, breaking through him like a poisoned arrow, and threatening to drag him down to the depths of the underworld where he belonged. He was close to breaking down. He didn't remember any of what he had done, and that terrified him. What other passages were there in his memory book that he had no idea about?

"It's short, but sweet," Bad hummed gently, the tone of his voice showing that he was relishing in the shock painting itself on Ranboo's face. "Don't you think?"

"Sweet" was the worst word Bad could have used for what the entry described. For this confession, for this admission of abhorrent crimes, Ranboo deserved no less than the darkest pits of pain and suffering.

At least, that's what he expected for himself.

From what Bad said next, the demon had other plans for him. "Now, I wonder how Sam would react if he ever found out," he said casually.

"No," Ranboo immediately spoke, his eyes wide. He tightened his grip around the papers. "Please don't." The supposed horrors of the inside of Pandora's Vault painted the most twisted and vile pictures in his mind.

"You know I'm always here for you, right?"

If the warden had read the contents of the passage Ranboo had just seen himself, he severely doubted that promise would still hold.

Bad frowned. "Why wouldn't we tell him?" he asked the hybrid. "Sam is a dear friend of ours."

"It... It... It wouldn't amount to anything," Ranboo managed to stutter. "He wants to move on, and showing him this won't help him do it."

"So, you're saying he doesn't have the right to know what happened?" The demon raised an eyebrow.

"|—"

"Sam has spent days hunting the culprit, with no success or leads of any kind. Turns out, the one responsible for the lockdown was much closer than any of us would have thought..."

"You're messing with me." Ranboo's gaze hardened. The Eggpire was toying with him, and he knew it. Playing with their food, as some would say. Dragging out the fear and the stress as long as they could, and for what? Their own amusement? As much as the passages Ranboo wrote were irrefutable proof of his guilt, Bad was still dangling threats in front of him as he would do with a dog and a bone, striving for some sort of reaction.

The demon's reply was sharp, and serious. "Oh, are we?" he hummed, squaring up to the hybrid. His sharp teeth glinted against his dark skin. "You think this is a joke, do you? Well then, I wonder what would happen if we... leaked a few pages? To the public, I mean."

Ranboo sucked in a breath, then quickly interjected. "No one will believe you." His hands tightened around his memory book and the translated passages, rendering any attempt of someone snatching them back impossible.

"Are you sure about that?" Bad's answer was just as chilling as the rest of his threats, and the hybrid's blood ran cold. The demon stepped away. "Who will everyone be more likely to believe?" He gestured to himself and Antfrost. "Two well-respected leaders of a powerful faction, both loyal friends and guards of the Warden and his Vault—" He pointed at Ranboo. "—or a desperate, forgetful and young hybrid who was publicly outed as a traitor to L'Manberg, and then sought refuge with the anarchists that destroyed it?"

Ranboo couldn't answer. For the first time during the encounter, he didn't have any way of talking back with a counterattack of any sort. Instead, he kept his grasp around his journal, and his eyes riveted on the floor. "What happened to you, Bad...?" he mumbled.

Where was the Bad that he first knew, the one with the big, friendly smile, the warm hugs and even warmer basket of freshly baked muffins always on hand?

The Bad who would jump at the opportunity to help Ranboo for the slightest things, even though they belonged to separate factions?

The soft, gentle Bad that could see the best in everyone, no matter what?

Ranboo looked over at him once more.

The Bad he now had standing in front of him was certainly living up to his name.

The demon faced him again. "I grew as a person, Ranboo. That's what happened. I've changed for the better." The hybrid caught him glaring at the memory book. "Which is clearly more than I can say for you."

Ranboo didn't know if he was right.

Ranboo didn't know if he was wrong.

All he knew was that the thought of everyone finding out about his heinous actions was something he couldn't bear. "Bad, please. Why don't we just forget about this? None of these... ramblings even concern you. Why are you so interested in them?"

"You're right," Bad agreed. "They don't concern me, and I'll probably forget about them at some point. But the Egg won't."

The Egg.

Of course it all circled back to the Egg. It always did, especially when the Eggpire was involved in the conversation. But Ranboo was still somewhat puzzled.

"The Egg?"

"The Egg, Ranboo. You've been very vocal about your hate for it."

The hybrid was starting to regret his earlier comment about the "growth problem".

"And someone who hates the Egg isn't a friend of it, so why should we help the enemy?"

This time, Ranboo had a million things to say, a million different comebacks and persuasive comments, ready to lash at his rivals with red hot anger and spite, but he still stayed silent. Trying to talk Bad out of following the Egg – as many had tried to do before – was like talking to a brick wall. Stubborn, thick and unmoving.

Bad wouldn't budge, and neither would any of his infected associates.

Ranboo had encountered the Egg only once, and once was enough for him to firmly decide to stand against it. Thankfully, his other close friends were on his side, so he never had the stress of trying to be converted to its strange cult every minute or so.

"Please... don't do this," he whispered, shaking like a leaf. "You won't gain anything from revealing what you know, and... and..."

He didn't even have to look at Bad to know he was smirking at his attitude. Emotions were building up inside of Ranboo, and if he wasn't careful, another panic attack would overwhelm him and explode like a volcano. Every attempt to dissuade them was useless, and a waste of breath. Or at least, he thought so, until the demon spoke again.

"Well... We could make an arrangement."

Arrangement? Ranboo looked up, possibly even more fearful than before. Blackmail was something that happened to other people, not him. He never thought he'd be involved in a scheme like it, until now. Blackmail was terrifying, but he had no other choice.

"What arrangement?" he asked, brainstorming possible demands. "If it's gold you want, I can pay—"

"No, no Ranboo. We don't want any money."

That did not bode well with what they would ask of him, and Ranboo's ears flattened against his head. "Then...?"

Bad cast a sideways glance to Ant, then back at the hybrid. "In order to buy our silence, you have to do something for us."

Ranboo figured. He stood up as straight as he could, pressure building up inside his chest. "What kind of "something" do you have in mind?"

Join the Eggpire, perhaps? It would be a scary and dangerous venture, but not one that Ranboo would find too hard to pull off. Faking corruption could be the way to bypass the watchful eyes, and perhaps he could even use the information he'd gather in the long run, to eventually vanquish the Egg and its disciples.

Soon enough, that was the outcome he was begging for. Anything but the task Bad had ended up asking him to perform. The demon gestured to Antfrost, who obediently hurried to his side once again and removed something else from his satchel.

At first, Ranboo thought it would be more papers – perhaps to forge something for them, like a signature? He hadn't tried to copy someone's handwriting before, but there was a first time for everything after all – but soon realized that it wasn't. Not even close.

The item that Ant had revealed and had handed to his friend was something that made the hybrid's blood run cold. Even more so than it had when Bad had originally threatened him.

In the palm of Bad's clawed, black hands, a silver dagger stared back up at him.

The grip was cushioned with rough strips of dark brown leather tied together with small strands of string, supporting a large pommel encrusted with a blood red gemstone. The blade was long and twisted, ending in a point as thin and pointy as a needle, and sharp enough to slice through anything with ease. Small red stems and tendrils curled around the weapon, almost covering the entire cross-guard, clinging on like ivy growths to a dead tree.

Ranboo's eyes widened, and he took a few steps back, just enough to put a comfortable distance between him and the weapon. Bad grinned at his discomfort. "Relax, Ranboo, it's just a dagger," he said in a soft tone that did anything but reassure the hybrid. "I thought you'd be used to all this weaponry by now."

"I..." His eyes were glued to the blade, its glare blinding his senses. The red gem at the top stared back at him, beckoning. Frantic whispers began to submerge his mind. He covered his ears to block them out, letting his memory book fall to the floor in the process.

"Ranboo?"

He was scared, yes, but also filled with a dreaded rage. "Bad," he growled, his voice low. "What the heck do you want me to do?"

It was somewhat obvious. The only real question now, however, was who the victim was going to be. Bad tossed the dagger from hand to hand, unfazed by Ranboo's switch in behaviour. "It's not as bad as you think it'll be," he said. "I just want you to kill The Blade."

The silence that followed was so deafening, Ranboo could hear his own heartbeat, loud and panicked. A soft breeze wafted through his hair, carrying more spores around him like little fireflies. This time, he made no move to brush them off. "You... what?" His throat was tight, and every breath felt strained and forced.

"I want you to kill The Blade. I thought that was simple enough to understand," Bad repeated, before quickly adding; "Calm down, I'm just asking you to do it once."

Ranboo's head began to spin. "O-Once...? I... I don't..."

"Well, if Technoblade truly never dies, then he should have all three of his lives intact," the demon continued, as if his demand was the most natural thing in the world. "He won't miss one measly one, will he?"

"That's... That's not the point, Bad..."

Ranboo gasped for air, his knees close to buckling. His heart and mind were racing, and his gaze was lost, shock stopping him from acting normally.

Kill Technoblade.

Two words he had never thought he'd hear in the same sentence. So simple, yet so damning to him. No matter how harsh a mentor Techno was, no matter his less-than-peaceful actions in the past, Ranboo could never willingly betray him, let alone murder him in cold blood. Technoblade was his friend. Even if he did want to kill him, chances are he wouldn't be able to. Techno knew better than letting himself get stabbed so easily. If he was caught, he'd perhaps escape with half his skull missing, and that was if he was lucky.

If?

Was he... Was he seriously considering doing it?

"You're hesitant, I can tell."

"Of course I'm hesitating!" Ranboo exclaimed, frantic. "This is Technoblade we're talking about!"

"I don't see why that would be an issue. You live with him, don't you?"

"Why him?" the hybrid demanded to know. "Why would I risk my life to stab him?"

The demon sighed. "It's just a little warning from the Eggpire, nothing more. You can't expect someone so powerful to reject the Egg and get off that easily."

"But—"

"Your only concern right now, as far as I know, is that you need to buy our silence about your... questionable actions."

"No. I won't. I can't." Ranboo refused, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Techno is my friend. He opened up his home to me. I can't turn on him."

"Opened it up? Don't you mean 'reluctantly let you in when you begged at his feet'?" Bad's glowing eyes narrowed, now two small slivers on a canvas of pitch black. "Don't think that we didn't all see you run off with him after Doomsday. Some of us know what really happened. Either way..." He briefly glanced at the scattered papers on the ground. "You might not have a home to go back to, if you fail the task or if you refuse it. Sam isn't the only one you've wronged, or so your coded confessions say. Techno won't forgive you that easily for what you've done either. If he knew what you did, that is."

Again, Bad was right, and they both knew it.

Technoblade was strict when it came to reciprocity and loyalty. When Tommy had supposedly betrayed him – twice – he had lashed out unlike anything anyone had seen before, and had caused L'Manberg to fall two times in the process, the last time to full destruction.

If Techno learned of anything incriminating against him from the memory book, of which Ranboo could bet there were a few entries that concerned the piglin, he wouldn't hesitate to kick the hybrid out of their small settlement in the Antarctic Commune, or worse, hunt him down and gore him until the tundra snow ran red with his blood. Ranboo wouldn't have the strength of the morals to lie and deny his involvement and what was set in ink.

But then, if Ranboo murdered him, even once, then the same outcome could be imminent. What if he succeeded...? What then?

Did Technoblade really have three lives? Was he really as immortal as he claimed?

Or was he down to one and tried to hide it?

What if this murder by Ranboo's hands was his final demise?

Bad could likely see that Ranboo was torn, and seemed to take it as his cue to leave. He thrust the dagger into the ground, blade down into the earth, and stepped back. "We trust you to make the best decision, Ranboo." If it wasn't for the demands and threats thrown beforehand, Ranboo would think that the demon's soft tone was genuine and caring. He knew better now. "You're growing up so fast. It's time you sacrifice something, as we all have. Just remember what you have to lose." Then, in a flurry of black and white fabric and cloak, Bad turned around and walked right back the way he came.

Ranboo's eyes were still staring down, and he didn't realize Antfrost had approached him, until he saw the feet and the tip of a brown tail enter his peripheral vision. Ant hadn't said anything during the entire conversation, and just seemed to have accompanied Bad as a pack mule.

So much for a supposed equal leadership in the Badlands.

"I'd take the offer if I was you," the cat mewled. "It'll be better than whatever other mess you could end up throwing us all into." With those final few words of advice, he too left the scene, his footsteps as light as velvet.

Everything fell quiet, save for the incessant chatter in Ranboo's ears. The Egg was laughing at him, its incomprehensible words made to persuade, and mock. At least this time, it was screaming something other than the dreaded word "traitor" over and over, as it had whenever Ranboo had the displeasure of hearing it speak. Ranboo didn't move for a long while, until he was sure the Eggpire had left. He turned his eyes to the weapon.

The silver dagger gleamed like a sharp fang, ready to plunge itself into some fresh meat and taste blood. It was beckoning to him, willing him to grab the grip and use it. Ranboo restrained himself. He tried to think of a way around the situation.

Could he lie to the Eggpire about murdering Techno?

No; they probably had their own way of spying on him, and would know that he didn't do what they asked.

Could he warn Techno in advance?

He couldn't do that either; then he'd have to explain why he was forced to kill him, and the truths he was trying to hide would be revealed anyway. Lying to his enemies was one thing, but to his friends was another.

Whichever way he looked, the inevitable seemed to stare back at him.

He had no choice.

The Egg cackled.

A gentle tap on his shoulder made him look around, and found Tommy's ghost staring back at him, holding out the memory book and the papers that were previously scattered all over the floor. Ranboo had never been so relieved to be alone with the phantom again, and took his belongings back. "Thank you, Tommy," he smiled, before immediately feeling the stab of guilt again.

Tommy stared up at him with misty, white eyes, a small smile gracing his transparent face. He looked so peaceful, and so innocent. Ranboo had killed him.

Dream was the godlike "He" the hybrid referred to so often in his Ender ramblings. Who else could be trapped in Pandora's Vault like the passages described? His strange interactions and comments when they would bump into each other before he was imprisoned made sense now.

The exclamations of "Hello Ranboo! I trust your cut is doing a little better now! Sorry again, by the way!" or other quips of the like when they'd cross paths made sense too.

The mentions from Dream himself of apparent meetings they had, now revealed to be much more than simple conversations.

Even the way Ranboo had managed to vanquish Technoblade that one training session, with the technique that filled his mentor's eyes with terror and shock unlike anything he had seen.

The realization almost made him faint.

He had trained with Dream. He had helped him with his schemes, willingly or not.

As he stared at the ghost in front of him, he felt like crying.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," he sniffled. "I'm so, so sorry..." When he was given a puzzled expression in return, he quickly tried to lighten the situation. "I'm sorry you had to witness that conversation, I mean. The Eggpire aren't exactly the most friendly people here..."

Tommy seemed to understand, and shrugged. He didn't really seem to care. His gaze also went down to the blade, peering at the red thorns.

Immediately, Ranboo picked it up, and shoved it into his belt. He didn't know what he'd do yet, but he had a feeling that he had to decide quickly. Taking the dagger with him was the best option, even if he wasn't going to use it.

"Well," Ranboo sighed, trying to regain his composure. He had to get out of here, away from the Egg, and try and forget what had just happened. He needed comfort, and peace. He forced out a small grin, for Tommy's sake. "How about we go and visit Tubbo?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Captain's Call

"LAND AHOY!" The heavy brass bell of the ship rang with a deafening chime as the captain changed their course, heading straight into the harbour. The L'Manberg port was still intact after everything it had been through.

Or so, it seemed to be at first. Those who knew where to look could still spy the large craters and chasms left by Doomsday's explosions, hidden by the wooden walkways and warehouses. But the travelling merchants and foreign warships didn't need to know that.

As with all of L'Manberg's old territory, it had fallen into the hands of the Greater SMP, and King Eret had tried to rebuild the harbour as best he could – putting it back into business and providing a flourishing, commercial pit-stop for the sailors who bravely crossed the oceans for nothing meagre pay and a bought or two of scurvy and dysentery.

The slapping of freshly caught fish against the wooden tables and the rattling of sea salt filled the air, along with the shouts of peddlers and sellers whose cries were no different to those of the seagulls screeching above them. Clueless customers and

curious travellers flocked to the stalls and at the edges of the piers, gazing wistfully out at the ocean and the riches it brought to their land. Gaggles of small children darted in and out of the merchants and their own mothers, laughing and playing with small ship models so beautifully made that they easily rivalled the magnificence of the real boats they portrayed.

In between the crowd, another figure pranced across the decks, her eyes glued to the incoming vessel in the distance, looming and somewhat menacing. She knew for a fact, however, that there was nothing dangerous about this ship. Breathless, she smiled and rushed to the edge of the port. She almost tripped over her own feet in her excitement, narrowly missing falling into the sea and getting dragged down to a watery grave.

The galleon flew across the waves, getting closer and closer by the second. Smaller fishing boats struggled to manoeuvre out of the way, for fear of being sunk, and one or two smaller rafts capsized as the ship's wake rocked them violently. White sails billowed out as the salty air rushed through them, fluttering the colourful flags at the very top of the masts. The dark wooden hull creaked ominously, covered in stubborn barnacles and ocean algae. The heavy canons that peeped out from small traps in the side like sharp, deadly eyes were pulled in, and were followed by shouts of jubilation as the sailors on board acclaimed the shores they docked on.

The crowds scuttling around the harbour began to clap. Politely, it seemed, as it didn't appear that any of them knew exactly why the crew on the ship was yelling, and they all stopped after a minute or two and returned to their tasks at hand.

But Captain Puffy knew.

She knew exactly why the sailors were shouting, and she joined them in their celebration, removing the feathered tricorn from her head and waving to the ship. The anchor was thrown, crashing into the water and bringing up splashes as high as the pier's floor. A bridge was lowered soon after, slippery and wet.

Heavy, leather boots stomped down the deck and onto the ramp, belonging to a man with a flowing red and gold coat. His large hands gripped the barriers to steady himself, with still somewhat of a sway in his step.

The moment she saw him, Puffy wanted to run up and squeeze the life out of him. She knew better than risking making him slip and break his neck though, so she waited until he finally touched solid land. Even then, she didn't react right away, and waited until he caught her gaze.

"Welcome to the Greater SMP, Captain Sparklez," she greeted him, bending down with a respectful, sweeping reverence.

The bright smile on her face widened when she heard him laugh, deep and rumbling like the storms that roamed the oceans he had sailed on. "Please, Puffy. That's not how you greet an old friend, now is it?"

She didn't need telling twice, and immediately leapt into his arms. His captain's coat reeked of fish, salt and sweat. He probably hadn't changed it for the entire journey. He had also let his hair and his beard grow out, and it tickled the back of her neck as they hugged each other until a rib crunched in one of them. Even then, he picked her up and twirled her around, making her giggle. He put her down again.

"Well well, what a welcome!" he exclaimed.

Puffy pulled away. "I thought that's how you wanted an old friend to greet you," she grinned.

Sparklez rolled his eyes, then gazed at the sheep. His eyes were soft, and relieved. "It's good to see you again."

"The feeling is mutual!" She was still overly excited, and tried to tone it down ever so slightly. "I got your message, and thought I should greet you when you arrived."

Captain Sparklez chuckled again. "I'm surprised you actually received it," he admitted. "I thought you would have been out overseas." He looked her up and down. "Or does the captain's life not suit you any more?"

Following her gaze, Puffy looked down at herself. With her tricorne and her silver cutlass being the only items of her captain's uniform that she kept on her, her simple cotton shirt, trousers and dark black cape made her look more like a highwayman than a sailor. She shrugged.

"I haven't really had the chance to travel again," she told him. "I've been busy here."

"Busy?" He cocked an eyebrow. "What sort of busy—"

Before he had a chance to finish his sentence, something small and turbulent scampered across the port like a little hurricane, crashing into Puffy's leg. A hand started tugging at her dark cloak, and she looked down. The sheep was immediately greeted by a small model of a galleon – quite like the one Sparklez himself commanded – being

held up to her, and a large, blue eye peeking up at her through the miniature masts and ropes.

"Ship!" Michelle exclaimed, excitedly jumping up and down with a wide grin plastered on her snout. Her cry was wobbly, and the phonetics sounded a little off, but the piglin was trying to make an effort, and it was the most joyful Puffy had seen her since they first met. Somewhere behind her, a group of children waved her off, laughing, and scampered away towards other adventures and acts of childlike foolishness.

Laughing, Puffy knelt down to the little one's height. "That's right!" Hoisting Michelle and her new toy up into her arms, she placed a little kiss on the exposed part of her skull, earning her a satisfied grunt. "A ship!" She pointed out to the embarkation looming over them, watching as the piglin's eyes widened, enchanted by its splendour. "Just like this one!"

The wonder in the little one's eyes warmed Puffy's heart to no end, and she placed another kiss, this time to her ear. The fur of the clothes she made for her – worthy of the coldest of winters in Snowchester – tickled her neck.

"Well."

She turned as Captain Sparklez spoke, staring at the piglin in her arms. He scratched his beard, looking pleasantly surprised. "Well what?" she asked.

He cocked an eyebrow. "You've got to catch me up on quite a lot, I'd say..."

A while later, all three of them were cosied up in a nearby tavern, at a table looked over by a large grimy window giving out onto the port and the ships in the harbour.

The booth they were seated in was warm and out of the way, lined with soft leather seats and polished wooden sides. Their conversations had been only disturbed by the drunken sea shanties of the other customers and the friendly mistress of the house who would come and refill their mugs of ale ever so often. The tavern was loud and stuffy, filled with tobacco smoke and cries of delight, but Captain Puffy could tell that her friend found it soothing from the way he had immediately discarded his coat and kicked his feet up on the table. She couldn't blame him. She loved the taverns as well, as obnoxiously loud and rowdy as they could get.

"So, you have been busy then," Captain Sparklez hummed, taking another swig of his drink.

Puffy's throat was a little sore from her constant talking, and she took a sip as well. "I have."

She watched as her friend's eyes lingered on Michelle, who was calmly playing with the toy galleon next to Puffy, pushing it along the tabletop and trying to squint past the cannons and into the hull. "I can't fault you for adopting her," he said. "Michelle's adorable."

At the mention of her name, the piglin looked up to the man, and smiled wildly.

Sparklez picked up his coat and searched for something in one of the many, many pockets. "You know, I was going to give this to your mother," he said, still addressing the little one. "But she hasn't exactly lost an eye yet."

The sheep perked up. "I'm sorry Sparklez, what was that?"

He seemed to ignore her, and produced a black velvet eyepatch. "Here we go!" With nimble fingers, he made quick work of the straps, and tied it over the youngling's missing eye. Pulling back and watching as Michelle began curiously fumbling with the flap, he grinned. "Looking like a true pirate, just like your mother!"

Captain Puffy tried to laugh it off. "I wouldn't say pirate exactly..." she said, but she didn't go any further when she saw the joy that overcame her daughter.

"Fine, a sea captain who just happened to plunder other galleons then," the other captain replied, smirking.

"Alright, first of all—" She counted the points on her fingers. "—they were ships that dealt in illegal trades. Two; I'd return the stolen cargo to wherever it came from. Three; I'd ask to keep only what benefited me and my crew."

Sparklez took another swig of ale, quite possibly to hide the amused look Puffy still managed to catch nonetheless. "That just sounds like a pirate with extra steps," he chuckled.

Captain Puffy glanced around them, making sure that no one was paying attention. "Fine, maybe I was, but don't use that word." She turned back to him. "I could get in a

lot of trouble, and I don't want to win myself a stay in Pandora's Vault, thank you very much."

"Well, at least you'll be closer to the sea if you do."

The answer she received was not one she expected, and she cocked her ears. "So," she began. "You've seen it have you?"

"It's hard to miss it," he told her. "It's menacing."

"It is," she agreed.

"One of my crew said it looked like a shadow of death," Sparklez continued. He wiped his mouth and placed his empty mug down. "They're not wrong."

No, they weren't wrong. Pandora's Vault was eerie. It looked solid and strong, but still looked a little unhinged. If one stared long enough, it looked much less rigid and much more like what Sparklez had described: a shadow of death. An abstract mass of darkness containing a being of chaos at its core. It still gave Puffy shivers whenever she'd glimpse it in the morning, shrouded by thick fog that enveloped its watchtowers and walls like spirits and ghosts tied to its very structure.

"You'd be surprised to hear that its warden and designer is one of the sweetest people I've ever met," Captain Puffy laughed half-heartedly, trying to lighten the mood.

To her surprise, her friend didn't seem convinced. "You mean the warden corrupted by his paranoia, duty and his love for bloodshed and violence?"

The sheep couldn't help but scoff at the ridiculous description. "Where did you hear that from?"

"Everywhere, if I'm being honest," Sparklez replied, looking a little uneasy.

"Well, it's all wrong." She knew her reply was a little cold and sharp, but she couldn't let slander against anyone she cared for keep spreading. "I'm pretty sure you're confusing with the legends of Technoblade."

"That's entirely possible. The names and stories get muddled after a while, especially if you've been stuck at sea for as long as I have." He smiled at her, reassuring. "You know him better than I do, and if you say he's a good guy, I'll believe you."

Her eyes darted down into her mug, as if the answers were etched in the bottom or swirling around in the remains of her ale. "I just wish that you could meet him for yourself. Spoken word is nothing."

"I doubt you'd lie to me. Your word will have to be good enough, won't it? We're just here to unload the cargo and gather more provisions before we set off again." He gestured to the harbour outside.

The bridge and the harbour below the galleon were crawling with sailors laden with crates, barrels and chests overflowing with strange and exotic items, some of which Puffy had never seen before. They passed them back and forth, piling them wherever they could, sweat dripping down their brows and their worked skin turning red and raw. But they were anything but miserable, their heavy work accompanied by loud and raucous sea shanties and hearty chuckles. The noise was muffled by the tavern's thick window panes, but was still loud enough to catch Michelle's attention and make her glue her snout to the glass.

"How long will you stay?" Puffy asked.

"A week at the most," Sparklez replied.

"What about the cargo? Aren't you going to sell it yourself?"

He shrugged. "We were only told to bring them to the merchants. We'll get the money, and that's it."

"Where will you go next?"

He gazed out at his ship. "Back to the Old World, I should think. I don't see what else I can do."

Captain Puffy's ears pricked up. "The Old World..." she breathed, her voice filled with wonderment. She leaned forwards in her seat. "What's it like?"

Captain Sparklez chuckled, sensing her enthusiasm. "What is there that you don't already know?"

"We've already established that some legends and rumours aren't trustworthy," she replied with a sigh. "Tell me."

"Well, in this case, they are all accurate." He tapped the side of his mug. "And it's sad that they are."

Puffy didn't know what it was exactly about the Old World that fascinated her so much. The stories painted it as a dark, polluted expanse of land and sea, with thick smog instead of clean air and a wasteland of a post-apocalyptic nature. Barren, dry and abandoned, like an arid desert. It was hard to believe that the Old World was once the richest and most powerful cluster of nations to ever exist, and once claimed itself as the centre of the universe.

The legends and logs made no mention of any remaining inhabitants, and the only civilization that the Old World had seen in over thousands of years were the sailors and the merchants travelling over a year to get to it, to try and retrieve anything that could be of use or worth saving. Books, treasures, art, statues... Anything but the advanced technology that had caused the fall of the civilizations that roamed centuries before.

Exotic-sounding places like France, Great Britain, China, Australia and Mexico among others were whispered about in the taverns as heroic myths and between high-ranked scholars who tried to piece together the history of these long forgotten territories. They tried their best, thanks to the ancient texts of grand authors such as Voltaire, Thomas Moore and Socrates. The remaining paintings of talented artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Picasso. Sketches of the few, still standing and crumbling monuments like the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, or the Pyramids of Giza. Theatrical plays by Molière and Shakespeare, and so, so many more relics of a time long forgotten.

And the history they uncovered was one full of tragedy. The Old World was a world built on blood and war, only partially illuminated by the discoveries that would soon enough be its downfall. The civilizations used their own greed, and their own ignorance to destroy themselves and everything around them. Tapping into the inventions of "smartphones" and "computers" and "artificial intelligence" was out of the question, for fear of another similar apocalypse breaking out somewhere else.

The Old World was left abandoned as a warning, though it was a warning not many heeded.

While technology was not the problem that could destroy their people – the redstone engineers, specially trained and taught, made sure of that – the constant bloodshed over petty things was. It was sad. It was a tragedy. Yet Captain Puffy still dreamed of sailing there one day.

"It takes a year to sail there, and a year to sail back. Not to mention a few months travelling around and salvaging."

"So?" Puffy huffed. "The sea doesn't faze me."

Sparklez smiled. "I never said it did, I'm just telling you that it's a big trip to make."

"Adventure," she corrected him. "It's an adventure, and I'd be up to taking it head on."

"I admire your courage, Puffy. I always have." Those words of praise sent warm waves throughout her body, and she grinned. "But you seem to have a life here now. I can't drag you away from that."

Her face fell again. "Nothing is permanent here." Her eyes were drawn to her daughter, who was now busy fiddling with the eyepatch Sparklez gave her; flipping it over her good eye, her ears, and even trying to tie it to her toy ship. Michelle was the most childish and carefree creature Puffy had seen in ages. Her heart swelled, before aching. How long would the peace last? How long would it take before Michelle was conscripted at her young age to fight for a cause she wouldn't even understand? "Violence will rip it away from you one way or another."

"But isn't the biggest threat to peace locked up?" her friend asked her. "That's the prisoner in the Vault, right?"

She tensed up. "Just because one villain has fallen doesn't mean that others won't rise." She was about to list the Eggpire as an example, but managed to hold her tongue. Captain Sparklez didn't need to know about the real danger in their supposed time of peace. "But you're right. I can't leave here. I have so many people I care for."

"Are you sure, Puffy?" The look in his eyes was ever so familiar. It was a questioning stare, and the same one he gave her years and years ago. It was one that had changed her life, for better and worse.

"I'm sure," she agreed, looking away and trying to chase away her regrets. It was hard, and the years that went by didn't make it any easier.

"Well..." Sparklez emptied his ale mug of the last few drops, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "We're leaving in a week or so, just in case you change your mind."

The fact that her friend was still giving her a chance to leave her new home sowed seeds of uncertainty in her mind, once again. "I don't think I will," she mumbled, knowing full well that she wasn't even convincing herself.

"I know you, Captain," Sparklez said. "And I'm sure whatever you choose to do will be the right decision." Cutting the conversation short, he stood up from the table, and threw a few coins down onto the table. "We've brought some really nice things back from the Old World, and I'm sure you'd both like to see them." He gently picked up Michelle, and readjusted her eyepatch, smiling as she clung onto his neck. Puffy picked up the discarded toy boat. "How about that?"

Puffy forced out a smile. "Perfect!" she exclaimed, suddenly distracted by Sparklez's inquisitive expression and narrowed eyes. "What?"

He gestured to someone behind her. "Do you know that guy?"

Now curious herself, Puffy looked around and followed his hand.

In between the gaggles of drunkards clustered around the bar and the poker tables, she could just glimpse a lone figure slumped over in one of the other booths. A pair of bright violet eyes stared at her from underneath the hood of a dark purple cloak. They locked gazes for an instant, and the purple figure stood up, abandoning his drink, and walked out the tavern door, a hand clenched around the netherite sword swinging at his side. The only trace left of his presence were a few shards of emerald scattered on the table as payment for his half-empty glass.

"Oh," Puffy said, nonchalant. "That's just Purpled. He's a bounty hunter, and likes to lurk. A solitary kind of warrior." Faced with Sparklez's still concerned expression, she tried to reassure him further. "Don't worry, he's just a kid."

The Captain made a face. "You know, I'm starting to get a little concerned about what the kids here do for a living..." he tutted, before heading towards the tavern exit.

In an alleyway not far from the tavern he had just sat in for the past hour and a half, Purpled watched from the shadows as a trio left. A man, a baby zombie piglin, and a sheep. The two adults were laughing together, and the little piglin was looking up at them with wide eyes and a gentle smile on her face.

The sheep in particular seemed very joyful and carefree, trotting over the cobbles as if she was no lighter than a feather, her curly fleece – or hair, if one wanted to be particular – bouncing behind her. The bounty hunter removed his hood, squinting to get a better look. For the first time in any mission, he was doubtful, and sceptical.

"Are you sure she's the correct target?" he asked his brother.

Further behind him, Punz leaned against the wall, idly kicking the carcass of a dead rat with his polished boots. His red eyes gleamed as they stared down Purpled. "Do you not trust me?" It was very obviously more of a challenge than a question.

"I do, Punz, but..." Purpled struggled to find his words. "This is Captain Puffy we're talking about."

"And?"

"She's... She's Captain Puffy!" he exclaimed, hoping that was enough of an explanation. "Also, she used to be one of Eret's knights, and is a good friend of his. Why would she decide to turn on him?"

Punz shrugged. "How would I know? I'm only telling you what I found out. Puffy is the culprit."

"Who are your sources?"

"You don't need to know."

Purpled frowned and turned back to the streets. "At least she's soft enough to cooperate and come quietly," he muttered.

"Quietly?" Punz scoffed audibly. "None of the Egg fanatics will ever come 'quietly'. I tried to stop her from planting more spores around my home, and she almost slit my throat." Purpled knew that was an exaggeration. No one would ever get close to slitting the mercenary's throat, or seriously harming him in any way. Nevertheless, he listened to what his brother told him. "You're going to have to use violence."

"You mean, take one of her lives?"

"All three if you have to. She's dangerous." Purpled was still hesitant, and he was certain Punz could sense that. "Or perhaps you're simply not cut out for the job. We could always just go and tell King Eret that--"

"No." The bounty hunter's response was short and confident. His violet eyes stayed locked on his target as she moved away with her friend and her daughter. "I can do it. I'll get her when she's alone, and I'll strike. It might take longer than usual though."

A strong hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. "Sometimes, spending time planning a perfect attack is the best course of action you can take," Punz said. Purpled could hear the smile behind his words. "I trust you to do it the right way."

Purpled shrugged him off. "I always do it the right way," he grumbled, banishing the guilt of what he was planning to do from his mind. He always did everything the right way. He never made mistakes. He'd do it quickly, cleanly and carefully, and without the tumultuous, cowardly thoughts that had taken hold of him for the first time in years.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Lock Me Up

Dragging a childish ghost over borders isn't the easiest thing to do. Nothing new there; Ranboo knew that from the couple of hours of experience he had already. But it was even harder to do now that his mind was heavily preoccupied with much more pressing matters.

With the memory book held tightly against his chest and his free hand grasped around Tommy's ghost wrist, the hybrid rushed along the Prime Path with long strides and a furrowed brow. He had a rough idea of where he was going, but the Egg's incomprehensible whispers were all that resonated in his ears and all that he was still strongly aware of. That, and the heaviness of the silver dagger in his pocket. The metal was red hot, and Ranboo felt like it was burning his side. All he wanted to do was take it out and plunge it somewhere.

Into the ground, or into someone. The sudden murderous thoughts terrified him, and he kept moving.

He paid attention to nothing else. Greetings from merchants and acquaintances, rocks and twigs he'd trip on, and even the angry cries he'd get when he'd accidentally push past someone. All of it faded into the back of his mind.

Tubbo. That's where we're going. To Tubbo. He tried to hang onto that thought.

They crossed the threshold of the Greater SMP's Nether Portal, and began the trek across the Nether route, towards Snowchester. Ranboo tried to distract himself from his dilemma by admiring the finished bridge linking two or three of the portals, and the streams of piping hot lava falling from the ceiling. He kept walking, faster and faster,

until he felt a small, warm rock hit the back of his neck. It was so sudden, and stung badly, like a wasp's stinger. The hybrid stopped, and realized Tommy's hand had slipped out of his grasp.

Now, the phantom was standing a few meters behind him, pouting and armed with rocks, one of which had been thrown to grab the hybrid's attention. Once the ghost saw he had been noticed, he gently cradled his wrist. Ranboo understood immediately, and was immediately washed over by guilt.

"I'm sorry Tommy," he whispered, moving closer. "I didn't realize I hurt you..." In truth, he didn't realize he *could* hurt him. He was a phantom, was he not? Could ghosts really get hurt? This one apparently could, and now clearly resented Ranboo for it. The hybrid's shoulders sagged. "I'm really sorry Tommy," he whispered, only looking away briefly when the piercing cry of a ghastr shrieked in the distance. "I just... I have a lot on my mind right now..." Had Tommy paid attention to the conversation he'd had with the Eggpire? Did he know what was at stake? Or did he simply just ignore everything and play with whatever he could find on the floor, like a child?

A child. A kid.

Ranboo couldn't find any other way to describe Tommy now. Maybe that's the only way he wanted to, anyway. He wanted to remember Tommy in the best of ways, and being a kid in these lands and in deadly situations was the highest compliment he could think of.

Suddenly, a pair of soft arms wrapped around his waist. Ranboo didn't expect Tommy's phantom to run up to him and give him a big hug. The real – sorry, *living* Tommy wouldn't have done such a thing. The most affectionate gesture Ranboo might have received was a fist bump or a high-five. But here was the ghost, squeezing him tightly with his transparent, battered and bloody body. His heart ached. Ranboo couldn't take the pain, and gently pushed the boy away. "I don't want to hurt you again," he said as an explanation. He could see, however, that Tommy wasn't happy. He looked away.

Immediately, his eyes landed on someone further down the cobblestone bridge, hurrying along the path and roughly heading towards the Snowchester Nether portal. Ranboo peered. Then widened his eyes.

It couldn't be...

He stared at Tommy, flabbergasted.

This was too coincidental and perfectly timed to not be set up in advance. Then again, maybe the hybrid still had a small sliver of good luck on his side. He called out at the top of his voice. The yell arched off the Nether roof, trembling a couple of the less solid, netherrack stalactites. "TUBBO!"

At first, he wasn't sure if the figure had heard him, and was prepared to try again. Thankfully, the distant silhouette did. He turned, and waved at Ranboo from where he stood. "RANBOO!"

Immediately, all the heavy problems and burdens the hybrid had carried all day – and even all his life – lifted, and he felt as light as a feather. His anxious expression had softened, turning into something much more serene. A gentle smile graced his face, and his laugh rang loudly like jolly church bells as he bolted towards the figure. Arms outstretched and heart beating fast, he was ready to sweep him off his feet and cuddle him like tomorrow wouldn't come.

Tubbo stopped him just as he was about to. He outstretched a white gloved hand, stopping the hybrid in his tracks. "Careful!"

Ranboo froze. "What?"

Tubbo pointed down at the wooden box he was holding. Small, buzzing critters crawled out from between the cracks and holes, swarming around his arms. "Bees," he said. "There was a swarm that settled up in the Community House."

The hybrid pulled his arms back in. "I see." He didn't fancy getting stung, although it couldn't exactly hurt any less than the burning rock that was lobbed at his neck. He was sure there was a scar there now. "That explains the getup as well."

"Pretty much."

Ranboo was still surprised that he managed to recognize Tubbo when he was bundled up in a puffy, shapeless white suit, with a large, wide brimmed hat that covered his face with dark black netting. Maybe it was thanks to the way Tubbo trotted down the bridge, his short height, or the feeble, out of tune humming he heard. It was the same hum that Ranboo likened to a buzzing hive, and Tubbo always said he liked it when he made the comparison.

Even though he couldn't hug him, Ranboo's heart still sang. "I've missed you," he hummed, smiling. He couldn't see Tubbo's face under the hat, and the dark netting made Ranboo imagine was talking to the cold void of space.

"Missed me?" the other scoffed. "It's been what... two days? Maybe even less than that."

"It feels like a lifetime." He felt a gentle purr rise in his throat.

"Sheesh! Don't make it too weird, will you?" But the hybrid knew Tubbo was smiling.

"I'm serious, I missed you."

"Why didn't you come to Snowchester then?"

"Well..." Ranboo composed himself. "I've been busy." This was the best time to introduce Tommy's ghost. With an upbeat tone and joyous disposition, the shock might be dulled to a degree.

"Busy eh?" Tubbo snorted. "Busy with what?"

"I've met someone—"

"Hold up!" Tubbo cut him off. "You've met someone?"

"Not in that way!" the hybrid rushed to rectify, chuckling nervously. An embarrassed blush spread across his cheeks and he coughed.

"Well I hope not!" Tubbo put the hive down on the floor, and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Or we'll have to go for a fourth divorce."

Ranboo rolled his eyes. "Oh woe is me," he sighed. "Not another divorce!" Pause. "Do I get to take the furniture this time?"

Tubbo immediately exploded with laughter, gasping for air and holding his sides.

Of course, "divorce" was just a joking term they both used when a fight would break out between them. Were they married? No, they were just kids: Tubbo was a few months short of eighteen, and Ranboo... Well, Ranboo couldn't remember exactly how old he was, and probably never would, but he knew he was around the same age as his partner.

But that didn't mean that their mutual affection didn't run deeper than anything Ranboo had ever experienced before, and they did both adopt Michael together, so certain marital terms did make some sort of sense in their relationship. Would their

partnership change when they'd get older? Would it evolve in any way, or even deteriorate and crumble?

From the way they cherished each other, there was a high likelihood that they'd stay together. Even their feelings ended up failing them, there was one thing they loved more than each other, and that was little Michael who was bound to keep them together no matter what.

"Tubbo, I promise you that it's not what you think," Ranboo still insisted, despite his partner clearly taking it as a joke. He couldn't bear an argument to erupt between them, especially today. He didn't know if he could take it, and the lava beneath them would suddenly seem much more inviting than it had previously.

"Then who is it?"

Ranboo's tongue suddenly tied itself into knots, and he stayed silent for a good, long time.

"Ranboo?"

The uncertainty of what he was about to do suddenly gnawed at him. Then again, he told himself, he was doing this for Tommy. A confused, forgetful Tommy. It was better to just get it over and done with.

"I have someone I want you to meet, and he's just as eager to see you, Tubbo." He stepped out of the way, keeping his gaze fixed on his partner and his invisible face. He wanted to catch every second of his reaction, and be there if he needed comforting.

But to his surprise, Tubbo didn't move. "Ranboo?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you mean?"

"Huh?"

"Is someone supposed to enderpearl in or something?"

The hybrid turned, expecting to see a practically invisible, nervous ghost. Instead, all he saw was thin air and the endless stretch of the Nether landscape. He blinked a couple of times.

"Ranboo, are you—"

"Everything's fine," he replied, forcing out a smile. "He's very hard to see sometimes, you just have to squint..." He did so, peering into the distance. Nothing. No one. That wasn't good. That wasn't good at all. Ranboo began to panic. "No, no, no..." he stuttered, frantically searching around them. "He was here... He was just here!"

"Ranboo—"

"You don't understand!" His breathing had turned short and sharp. "He was right here!" He spun around, his long tail whipping through the air and almost hitting his partner.

"RANBOO!" A pair of arms shot out and reached up as high as they could, stopping the hybrid from dizzying himself. "Who are you talking about? What's happening?"

"I... I..." Ranboo took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. "He... He was right behind me the whole time..."

"Who? Who the heck are you talking about?"

The hybrid knew he couldn't put it off any longer. The name came out in a feeble whisper, his voice strained. "Tommy."

A long, heavy silence followed his revelation. The warm air of the Nether suddenly seemed much more stuffier and unbearable, and Ranboo was now all too aware of the sweat dripping down his neck and the stickiness of the thick arctic cloak around his shoulders. Ranboo waited for the other to say something and break the tension. He didn't. At least, not until Ranboo tentatively made the first move. "He's—"

"Never say his name again."

Ranboo's eyes widened. "What?"

The once gentle and reassuring grip on him suddenly turned into an iron grasp, strong and painful. The hybrid thought his partner was going to rip him apart and claw out his shoulder blades. "You heard me," Tubbo muttered, his tone hard and serious. "Never speak of him again."

Ranboo stared at the netting, trying to glimpse Tubbo's eyes. His expression. Anything that showed him that what he just said was a light-hearted joke. Anything. All he could see was a pool of darkness.

He pushed away the hands – who were now seriously starting to hurt him and leave bruises – and stepped back. "Tubbo, you don't understand!" He was purposely speaking quickly so the other couldn't get a word in. He grabbed him by the arm. "Tommy is here. I've seen him, I've talked to him and I led him here to you! I wanted you to see him, at least one last time! He's so sweet, and seemed so eager to see you, and I–"

"Shut up."

"You've got to believe me!"

With a sudden, harsh shrug, Tubbo got rid of Ranboo's hands. "He's gone, Ranboo," he said, cold. "He's gone, and he isn't coming back."

The words shot through him like an arrow, painful and sudden. Ranboo's mind swam.

He had seen Tommy. He *knew* he had seen Tommy. He had... right? Doubts suddenly clouded his mind. "No, no, no..." he mumbled. "He's here... I know he is..."

But one quick check of his memory book showed no trace of the phantom, or any encounter with him. He was certain... He was...

Dazed, he barely heard Tubbo's next words. "Don't come home."

It took a minute or two to finally let it sink in. He snapped his head towards his partner. "Wh... What?"

"I want Michael to feel safe."

The implication was clear. "You think I'm insane...?" the hybrid managed to utter, swaying. His whole body seemed ready to give up on him completely, from his brain to his legs.

"Not insane exactly, just... mildly delusional." Ranboo couldn't see the difference between the two. "Ranboo, it's not for forever, and I still love you. Just... none of this is normal. None of this feels right, or safe for either of us, Michael included."

What wasn't normal for Tubbo? Was it grief? Was grief not a normal thing for this kid? Did he just discard it like the most mundane of tasks or cares? Ranboo didn't want to think of Tubbo that way, but his absence at Tommy's funeral couldn't be ignored. Neither could his disdain and anger at the simple mention of his best friend's name.

"You're sending me away, aren't you?"

"Don't say it like that. I'm just..." Sigh. "I'm just trying to protect you, Ranboo. Protect us. You're going through a tough time right now, and I think you just need to tone it down a little, y'know?"

"Tone it down?"

"Find somewhere safe to stay for a time, somewhere secure where you won't be a danger to yourself and others. Think things over. Control yourself."

Ranboo bristled, hating the feeling of being treated like a lunatic. "And what if I don't want to? What if I decide to come back anyway?"

"Please, I'm begging you Ranboo. Do what's right. Nothing good has ever come from ignoring important issues like this."

"You would know a lot about that, won't you?" His last retort came out as a hostile growl. Tubbo was being ridiculous, and hypocritical. He was acting like an idiot, a dumb fool who refused to see his own faults and concentrated on those of others.

Ranboo stormed off a second later, briskly turning back the way he came, their argument leaving a sour, unpleasant taste in his mouth. As he got further and further away, his anger subdued, and he ended up dragging his feet against the cobbles, his head down.

Was Tubbo right? Was he delusional?

He was certain Tommy's spirit was here... yet he hadn't shown himself when Ranboo needed him the most. The hybrid couldn't trust his own mind. Perhaps he was going insane with grief. He didn't want Michael to witness any of it, so Tubbo was right in that regard.

"Find somewhere safe to stay for a time, somewhere secure where you won't be a danger to yourself and others."

Ranboo mulled over his partner's suggestion, then suddenly stopped in his tracks. A "somewhere" had just popped into his head. It sounded so ridiculous, and thankfully, he didn't try to say anything out loud. It was somewhere that fit Tubbo's description to a tee, and when racking what was left of his brains, the prospect seemed more and more inviting, albeit terrifying. However, with everything that had happened to him today, and

all the threats he had received, a stay the place he thought of couldn't be that bad in comparison. Ranboo reminded himself that he wasn't doing this for himself. He was doing it for everyone he cared about.

Checking one last time around him, just in case he did glimpse Tommy and could reassure himself that he was sane, he ran. His long legs carried him across the Greater SMP as late evening dragged on, and he only paused briefly when he reached the border of red vines.

After that, his destination wasn't too further.

He could see it far away in the distance, waiting for him. Calling him. Beckoning to him. It was like a creature of darkness, inviting him closer and luring him with a false sense of security. Ranboo wanted nothing more than walk right into its jaws.

By the time Ranboo reached the prison, night had already fallen. Thankfully, the street-lights had managed to deter any of the nocturnal mobs from venturing into his path, and it wasn't like any of them were fast enough to keep up with the hybrid. Ranboo stared out at the looming Vault in the ocean, watching as the fires on the watchtowers burned like beady, devilish eyes in the dark.

The mainland entrance sat a little distance down the hill, also lit up through the bars of the windows. Squinting, Ranboo could just glimpse a shining golden figure lock the gates, a trident resting in the crook of his arm. He was just in time.

"SAM!" he yelled from where he stood, trying to catch the warden's attention.

He waited for a reply, until he noticed him deep in conversation with someone. Their voices were too low for him to hear what they were saying, but when the stranger bowed and headed his way, Ranboo recognized the figure immediately.

Quackity. What was Quackity doing here?

"Hello, Ranboo," Big Q greeted him casually, striding past him without a second look and a smug smile on his face. He twirled a small knife between his fingers, and hummed an eerie tune. The blade looked stained, though Ranboo could not tell with what. "Stay safe, Ender boy."

"You... You too..." Ranboo didn't know what else to do, except be polite and courteous. He didn't want to ask Quackity what he wanted with Sam; it was their own business, and he had no reason to pry into what didn't concern him. Or maybe it did concern him, and he would never know. The paranoia of being talked about behind his back was starting to get to him even more, especially after the memory book incident.

As soon as Quackity had disappeared out of sight, Ranboo ran down to the shore, tumbling down the hill and spraining his ankle in the process. As he got closer, Sam turned his way. "Hey Ranboo," he said gently when the young hybrid had finally joined him.

"H... Hey Sam..." Ranboo panted, reaching down and nursing his injured foot. The pain was sharp, and rippled through his nerves. He grit his teeth.

Sam cast a look around them. "What are you doing here? It's late."

Ranboo didn't immediately answer him, and instead turned to the black entrance next to them. The dim redstone lamps were still on inside, but the Nether Portal was nothing but an empty obsidian frame, silent. Blocking the way in were two sturdy gates of wrought iron and steel. They were locked shut, gnarled and menacing like dark thorns barring the access. He stared long and hard in between the gates. Too long perhaps, as Sam took notice. "Ranboo?"

The hybrid turned back to him. He didn't know what expression was painted on his face, but it was enough to apparently worry the warden. "I need to get into the prison."

There was a long silence. Then Sam started to chuckle. "You... You what?" he scoffed, his mask muffling his amusement.

Ranboo stared into the man's blackened eyes. He saw them searching his face for any sign of a teasing glint, or anything that would suggest his demand was nothing but a jest. Unfortunately, the hybrid would have to disappoint the warden. "I need to get into the prison," he repeated, quicker than the first time. He flinched, expecting some sort of annoyed reprimand.

Sam blinked at him, taken aback. "I've just finished locking everything up, and I don't want to have to—" He stopped, shaking his head. "No one's even allowed in the prison. It's off limits. No visitors."

"Then what was Quackity doing there?" the hybrid couldn't help but blurt out.

From the way Sam breathed in and straightened his back, it was clear that he didn't want to answer the question. "He wanted to discuss some Las Nevadas building projects," he finally sighed. "I *am* his business partner after all."

Although that particular fact wasn't common knowledge, Ranboo had heard enough rumours run around. "I know you are," he muttered, gripping his sleeve. His emotions were starting to peak again, but he tried to control them. For now. "But why at the Vault? Why not in Las Nevadas itself?"

"What are you—"

"I bet you let him in," the hybrid continued, keeping his gaze trained anywhere but on the warden. "Quackity was allowed in, wasn't he?"

"Ranboo." There was a light *thunk!* as Sam hit his trident against the ground. The hybrid knew that it was very much deliberate, and not a slip up of any sort. He was inviting – no, *demanding* – Ranboo to shut up. It worked. Somewhat.

Ranboo stopped his rant and endless, almost jealous questions, although his frustration still seethed through him. "What?" he snapped, glaring.

"What's this about?"

"You don't understand..."

"Then *make* me understand." It was another invitation, albeit much gentler and less threatening.

It still did nothing to sway Ranboo's current mindset. "I can't," he replied.

"You don't know that—"

"I just need to go in, Sam." That was as much of an explanation Ranboo was willing to give. He looked up. Sam stared back, passive. It was almost as if he was watching over a moody child, calmly waiting for them to stop jabbering to finally get a word or action in. Maybe that look was what provoked Ranboo's next reaction. His bitterness and stubbornness faded away, replaced by a desperate plea. "Please!" As enderman hybrid stood there – his hands clasped, begging – Sam's expression turned more and more worried by the second. Without a word, he took off his gas-mask. "Sam—"

"Ranboo..."

The way his name was spoken so softly was foreign to him. There was only one other time – to Ranboo's rare recollection – the warden had used that tone; when Tommy died and Ranboo confronted Sam, wanting to pin the blame on him. On anyone. Now the entries from his memory book sent those grief-stricken accusations towards everyone else up in smoke.

"Are you alright?"

Ranboo chuckled nervously. "I'm fine! Absolutely!" He knew he sounded somewhat insane, but he still pushed through with his happy act. "I just *really* need to get into the prison!" Suddenly, Sam removed one of his gloves, and held the back of his bare hand up to Ranboo's forehead. The hybrid could count the green freckles on his palm and the redstone stains on his fingertips. Realizing the warden was trying to take his temperature and possibly diagnose him with some offending sickness, the hand was quickly pushed away. "I'm fine," he said, unconvincing.

Sam respected his wishes, and put his glove back on. But his worry did not fade from his face. "You told me you didn't want to go to the prison."

Ranboo couldn't deny what Sam said. "Yes, I did once, but I'm telling you *now* that I need to go into the Vault."

"Is this about Dream?" The warden's tone was cold, but not towards Ranboo, that the hybrid knew. Dream's name seemed to slip out of his mouth like a horrible bile, with a vile taste and as enjoyable as a glass of poison. "Do you want to visit Dream?"

Ranboo's frustration returned, louder and more desperate than ever before. "No, Sam! You don't get it!" Maybe it was the way the hybrid had been so vague with his petty pleas and mutters, or maybe Sam was truly that oblivious. His head throbbed, and Ranboo buried it in his hand. He pulled and tugged, wanting to rip his hair out of his scalp. He didn't want to lash out at Sam. He didn't trust himself not to try and snap the warden's neck if the enderwalk took over at that very moment. "I don't want to visit Dream!"

"Then..." Sam trailed off. Ranboo could feel his green eyes on him as he hunched over even further.

He held his hand out in front of him – not pleading like before, but crossed and tightly clenched into fists. If Sam wouldn't understand now, then the hybrid didn't know what else he could do, how clearer he could be. "*I* need to be put *in* the prison."

The silence that followed was deafening. Even the ocean had hushed, and the howling nocturnal wind that had been blowing around them as well. The elements themselves appeared to be taken aback, whispering among themselves with voices no one else but them could hear. Ranboo kept his hands out, biting his lip.

C'mon Sam... he pleaded in his mind. *I know you understand now. Just shackle me and get on with it.*

When even his very obvious gesture didn't seem to work, Ranboo suddenly snapped to attention. A thought suddenly crossed his mind. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

He started undoing his leg guards and light, armoured shoulder pads. Dropping them on the ground, he started unbuckling his belt. His sword and scabbard clattered beside his meagre pieces of armour, followed by his magnificent arctic cape. It was a present from Techno – "*Welcome to the Antarctic Commune, Ranboo. You're one of us now.*" – and the hybrid always took particular care of it, but today it was chucked on the muddy ground like little more than a bundle of dirty washing. He held out his hands again. The ocean air felt suddenly a whole lot colder when he wore nothing but a thin silk shirt, waistcoat, red cravat, trousers and boots.

He tried not to shiver. "I don't want to seem like a threat." His long tail wound around his leg.

But even when he had discarded all his heavy items and weapons, Sam still did not move. When Ranboo cast him small looks, he was surprised to find that he hadn't even moved, his body or his expression. "Ranboo, I'm not going to lock an innocent person up," he finally said, his voice low.

Innocent. If only he knew. Ranboo was anything but innocent. If anything, what he had done would be reason enough for Sam to kill him three times over, right there and right now. Offering himself to the warden and his Vault as another, highly dangerous prisoner was only his cowardly mind trying to save his skin in the only way he knew how to. Submit.

"I... I..." He couldn't say anything. Silently, he slackened his posture, and let out a long, shaky breath.

"You haven't done anything wrong," Sam told him.

Ranboo knew that was a lie. Sam had no idea, and he never would. All the hybrid could do now was keep his mouth shut and his hands up.

"Are you alright?"

"I can't tell you..." Ranboo mumbled under his breath.

"What's wrong with you?" It came out a little harsh, but he knew Sam well enough to know that it was anything but mean.

Tears began to prick the corners of his mismatched eyes. "I can't tell anyone..." He wiped his face on his shoulder with a loud snuffle.

"Just tell me you're alright. Please." Sam sounded almost as desperate as Ranboo had been and just as frustrated, although it was clear that the warden knew how to control himself better.

With everything that had happened to him in the last day alone, the hybrid was at a loss. "I... I... I don't know any more..." Ranboo looked up. His hands parted, only to grab Sam's arms. "Please Sam, I'm begging you." Heavy breaths punctuated his words, and he tightened his grip. "Put me in the prison. Just put me in the prison!"

Sam's stare didn't waver. "No—"

"PUT ME IN THE PRISON, SAM!" His long fingers dug into the green fabric, threatening to tear it apart.

"I'm *not* going to put you in the prison." Sam repeated. "You haven't done anything wrong—"

"I CAN'T TELL YOU WHAT I HAVE!" The acid tears burned his cheeks as they began to fall.

There was a small growl. "Stop this."

"PLEASE—"

Ranboo's sentence was cut short when Sam pulled him into his arms. His hunched over body was quickly encircled by strong, caring arms. The hybrid wanted to scream and kick, and bite his way out of the embrace. It was too loving, too caring, and he didn't deserve it. He nevertheless fought his instincts and held tightly onto the warden, if only to encourage him to drag him off into Pandora's Vault.

"I'm not putting you in that prison." Sam's voice was nothing more than a whisper, and Ranboo had to cock his large, pointed ears to hear him properly. It was a whisper,

sure, but it was still strong and composed. "I'm not opening up the Vault to another guest, and I'm not going to let anyone walk through that door except me because of what happened. You know that."

"I told you, I'm not here to visit—"

"I think you need to go home, Ranboo." There was a shuffle, and the hybrid gasped as he felt the cool handle of Sam's trident press against his back.

He didn't dare move. "You're... You're threatening me, aren't you?" he stuttered.

"I don't want it to come to that." A moment or two later, the warden let go of the hybrid, and helped him gather up his discarded items. When Ranboo still didn't move to collect them, he felt Sam put them on, his worried eyes never leaving his face, not even for a second. The last thing Sam returned was the Antarctic cape, settling it around the hybrid's shoulders and making sure Ranboo was nice and warm. He stepped back once again, and lifted a gentle hand to his face. "Just... Please leave. For both our sakes."

Ranboo watched as the warden forced out a smile. He didn't feel the cold wind any more, and the soft touch of the white fur collar brought him back to his senses. He knew he should leave, or get ready to face a side of Sam he didn't really want to see. He chose to go. For now.

Fear and cowardice are strange things. They can make one desperate beyond reason. Submission and acceptance are all very well, but when a strong surge of fear takes over, they don't necessarily hold up. Another term for that situation could be "survival instinct".

"What will it take for you to put me in there?" the hybrid asked.

Sam's eyes narrowed. "I've told you Ranboo, you haven't done anything wrong."

"But what if I did?" Ranboo almost exploded with laughter when the warden's expression faded from concern to shock. His heart started to beat faster. "What if I did something so bad that you would have no *choice* but to put me in there?"

The Eggpire's dagger weighed even more in his pocket. The crimson whispers invaded his mind once again.

"Ranboo, go home." The voice was less caring now. It was an order. "Go home and rest. You're not feeling well. You're not... you're not thinking rationally."

A purple veil began to dance in front of Ranboo's eyes, as it had a few times before. This time, he could finally place and name the feeling. He could feel the unconscious state take hold of him again. The enderwalk was in progress. If Sam didn't back down, he would be signing his own death warrant. But Ranboo wouldn't let that happen, no matter how uncooperative and stubborn the warden was.

"If you won't put me in Pandora's Vault..." He trailed off, feeling his senses waver and begin to fade away. "I'll make you."

He could hear Sam running after him as he rushed away, but the enderwalk had been merciful this time around. Instead of buried memories of training with Dream or a surge of strength strong enough to take down Technoblade, it had blessed him with enough stamina and speed to make a quick getaway. Before long, Sam's yells were nothing but distant echoes, and it was better that way.

Ranboo had something important he needed to do.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Blood Of The Blood God

How easy is it to kill someone?

The technique itself isn't a mystery: good stab to the chest will do wonders, or bringing down an axe on a body part of choice. Even poison is a good way to go, if you want to be subtle that is. No, the real question is; how easy is it *morally* to kill someone?

Surely, taking another life isn't that easy to do on a whim, right? It seems to vary from killer to killer. Some do indeed feel remorse, and the guilt will haunt them forever until they get slaughtered by an enemy out for revenge, or until they finish themselves off by their own hand.

Others don't feel or say anything. Either, they are too numbed by the repeated violence and blood they have spilt, or they see death as just another task, another order from someone else. They often tell themselves that they are not at fault for what they have done, which is another way of denying the truth and forgetting themselves little by little.

And some – very few, but still some nevertheless – revel in it. Some love nothing more than slitting a poor, innocent soul's throat and watching the blood gush out of the wound like a waterfall. They too are often numbed by their own actions, but instead of treating it like some sort of reluctant obligation, they take pride in their ability to kill without a second thought.

Ranboo couldn't place his current emotions in one of these categories. He seemed to be waltzing across all three of them. Yes, he felt remorse. Always. He was remorseful for the smallest of things, from finishing the last drop of honey in the pot to accidentally stepping into someone's path.

Then again, he felt numb, and lost. All the bloodshed and the violence he had lived through and witnessed were deeply etched into his problematic brain and the parchment of his memory book, and would routinely pop up as sudden, unexpected memories, reminders even at the least convenient times. He even felt like wanting to murder so many people. It sounded awful, but it was true.

He wanted to kill Dream.

He wanted to kill the Egg and its disciples.

He *didn't* want to kill The Blade.

Once he came back to the Antarctic Commune, he locked himself in his shack, and developed a plan of action. He thanked whatever divinities were listening that Enderchest couldn't talk, otherwise that cat would blow his cover and horrify everyone with the plans and insults Ranboo threw around as he paced. The dagger was hidden under his pillow, just in case someone came looking for him.

Afterwards, he joined Phil, The Blade and Sapnap for dinner. It was dark outside, but not necessarily late for the anarchists. Dinner seemed to be one of the best parts of their days. It was a carefree time where they would all sit down together and share everything, from the food on the table to stories and gossip. Usually, Ranboo enjoyed these social moments: they all went round to The Blade's cabin, where a fine, delicious-smelling potato dish would be steaming on the table, accompanied by some cooked vegetables, fondue cheese and large cuts of roasted meat. It wasn't a feast exactly, but was still rich enough to make them all eat like kings.

Perhaps that wasn't the right comparison, considering their general distaste for governments of any sort. However, that evening, Ranboo could barely swallow a single morsel, and seemed to take ages to chew a mere bite of chicken. When asked if he was

alright, he simply told them that he wasn't that hungry. They didn't pry any further, and continued with their conversations. The hybrid took that time to try and briefly distract himself, listening in.

He expected to hear of plans to finally take down Kinoko Kingdom. The fascination wasn't out of pure hunger and bloodlust, but rather a morbid curiosity. But the mushroom kingdom's name wasn't even brought up. It hadn't for weeks.

Instead, The Blade was busy describing the magnificence of the fire show Sapnap had performed earlier that same day for him, to which the other warrior chuckled modestly and corrected the piglin on a few points here and there that The Blade had blown way out of proportion. That was odd to Ranboo.

Not the fire show, mind you. It was clear that Sapnap's burning powers definitely exceeded expectations. There was a reason why he was now the one to light the fire, cook the meals or warm up Philza's tea when he complained that it had gone cold.

The way The Blade exaggerated the show didn't surprise him either; a fabled warrior who had been constantly subjected to tall tales of his own exploits would definitely come to know how to relate other stories the same way. The absence of any progress concerning Kinoko's downfall was what was strange to him. As he watched Sapnap, he suddenly realized that there hadn't been any plans at all since the arsonist first sat down in the Syndicate meeting room.

The last couple of weeks had been absent of all anarchist scheming, and instead had been filled with calm, relaxing moments, hunting trips, storytelling, and other amusements. Any and all resentment from Phil or The Blade towards Sapnap had disappeared, and the fire warrior finally looked happy, with his nose and cheeks now constantly pink from the frozen weather. It was as if his initial mission and cry for help had been buried beneath an avalanche of friendship and acceptance.

Ranboo's theory was confirmed when The Blade and Sapnap suddenly pushed away their plates and decided to have a friendly little scuffle, with Phil watching on and shaking his head in despair. "You're like children," he sighed, grinning. Sapnap had been brought into their small, arctic group – dare Ranboo even say, family – and everyone was revelling in it.

Eventually, the dishes were cleared away, the excess food (notably from Ranboo's plate) were given to the dogs in the kennels and to Carl in his stable, and all four of them sat down for a game or two of chess from a set Phil had kindly brought over.

When The Blade put his glasses on, that's when they all knew that this friendly tournament would be brutal.

Out of everyone, Ranboo was the best at the game, but that evening had finished in miserable last place, having been beaten by Sapnap with a gambit he didn't even see coming. The final was held between Sapnap and Phil, which was soon won by the older man.

Sapnap resigned his king, huffing and frustrated, and Philza laughed. "When you've been alive for as long as I have," he hummed, twirling his winning bishop between his fingers. "You get to know the ins and outs of these games."

Sapnap was apparently not done, and smirked. "Alright, old man," he grinned. "Beat Ranboo. Then you'll be allowed to brag."

"Technically, I did, didn't I?"

The hybrid felt three pairs of eyes on him, and he hunched over even more. "Technically..." he managed to mumble.

"Are you alright, mate?"

"I think the kid's tired." A heavy hand came down to rest on Ranboo's shoulder, and he looked up. The Blade stared back at him. "Go to bed, Ranboo."

He looked at each of them in turn.

Phil smiled at him, reassuring and warm. Sapnap clicked his tongue and gave him a small, two fingered salute. And The Blade... Ranboo couldn't bear to look at him again, for fear of chickening out of what he was planning to do. He quickly stood up and headed towards the door. "Goodnight," he called back, with the most exhausted tone he could muster.

"Goodnight Ranboo! Sleep well, alright?"

Ranboo knew he wouldn't.

For the next couple of hours, he stayed in the complete darkness of his cabin, sitting on the edge of his bed and staring out of the window. Through the falling snow, he watched the golden lights in the distance. After a while, the lanterns in Philza's home were snuffed out, and soon after that, so were the ones in the The Blade's cabin. When the hybrid was sure that everyone was asleep, he put his scheme into action.

Allowing himself to only light a single, dim candle, Ranboo put his cloak around his shoulders, and checked that he still held on to the murder weapon graciously offered to him earlier that day. He picked up his memory book, and rushed over to his tiny writing desk. With shaking hands, he ripped a blank page out of the journal, and began to write something. He wasn't too aware of what he was scribbling, his mind drowning in the dread of what he was about to do. When his quill finally stopped scratching against the paper, he gently blew on it to let the ink dry. He then shoved it under the cover of his memory book and, making sure he had the translated papers as well, stuffed everything into one of his pockets.

If all else failed, his backup plan was ready.

Before he left, he looked around his shack once more, perhaps even for the last time. A few wisps of snow flew through a crack in his window, dancing with the faint dust particles in the air. Enderchest was sleeping peacefully on his pillow, curled up and purring. Ranboo gave her one last scratch behind the ears. In the far corner, his sword and scabbard lay against the wall, silent and unmoving. He didn't need it for this battle.

Ranboo took a deep breath, and blew out the candle. Then, before he changed his mind, he closed his front door. The snow beneath his feet was obnoxiously loud and crunchy, making him wince with every sound. The cold seeped in through his boots, freezing his toes, yet he kept going. The cabins got closer and closer, and every step he took felt like a step closer to an inevitable doom. Was it his? The Blade's? His sanity's? There was no way to tell. He couldn't look into the future to get the answers he wanted, or the ones he needed.

The snow beneath his feet soon turned to wooden steps, and he climbed the flight. Looking up, the starry night sky stared back at him, every star glimmering and judging his every movement. Even the moon seemed to be smiling, no more than a crescent; a lopsided grin awaiting the show to begin. Suddenly feeling sick, Ranboo diverted his gaze.

Much sooner than he would have wanted to, he came face to face with the front door. Made of spruce, it was hammered together by metal nails and had a brass keyhole. The shutters were of a similar, rustic style, and Ranboo tried to peek through the cracks. Unfortunately, he couldn't see anything. He couldn't prepare. All he could do was go in through the front door, and never turn back. Breathing heavily, Ranboo pressed his back against the wall, trying to sink into the frozen surface.

For what he expected was the last time, he took a deep breath of the pure, night air. He had a sneaking suspicion that before morning came, he'd either be dead in a

pool of blood, or trapped behind the bars of Pandora's Vault. Either way, he'd never get to appreciate the beauty of the tundra around him again. He never did in the first place, if he was being completely honest with himself.

Silently, he began to pray.

He prayed that the enderwalk would take hold of him at that moment. Not only would he no longer be able to feel himself, and thus could commit the crime without any hesitation or guilt in the moment, but it would also give him enough strength to push open the door and fight off The Blade if the need came to be. But he somehow knew the enderwalk didn't work like that. It wasn't some sort of convenient mindset that was constantly at his beck and call, ready to help him at a moment's notice. If anything, from what he knew, it hindered him in the worst ways possible.

For some reason, it had only taken a brief read of his own memory book's sacrilegious writings to get a name for his sleepwalking-like condition and the cryptic language he wrote in: the enderwalk, and Ender. When everything had finally clicked, he felt so dumb. Of course, he had only briefly heard those terms a long time ago, but as a half-enderman hybrid, he should have known better from the start. He was now aware of things that happened to him, and he was somewhat grateful that his body and mind hadn't completely decided to leave him in the dark void of ignorance. It seemed that suddenly, now knowing of and managing to put a name on the treacherous side of him, he felt... calmer, as if a massive weight was lifted off his shoulders.

The enderwalk didn't excuse anything, but it could at least explain his actions. The unconscious state was responsible for so much, from being outed as a traitor in front of the whole of L'Manberg to his inexplicable ties to the prisoner of Pandora's Vault. It could explain and somewhat justify everything, except what he was going to do now. Ranboo was fully aware, and he couldn't back down.

Forgive me.

Casting one last look towards the laughing stars, he turned back towards the house. When he tried the doorknob, it was locked. He hadn't expected any less of The Blade. Kneeling down, he began searching the wooden floor of the deck connecting Phil's home and The Blade's. Eventually, he managed to pry out a loose plank, under which he found the spare key.

The Blade had told him of the location one day, just in case of an emergency, and Ranboo had wasted no time in jotting the information down in his memory book. Tonight wasn't the sort of emergency The Blade had probably envisioned it being used

for, but it was still just as important and dire. With the brass key gripped firmly in his hand, Ranboo headed back over to the door, and put it in the lock. He turned it, releasing the bolt from the inside with a loud creak. He winced, checking behind him.

Phil's lodge was still as dark and silent as ever.

Mustering up as much courage as he could, the hybrid pushed open the front door. Immediately, he was hit by a powerful wave of warm air, taking him aback. The stark contrast with the frozen world outside shocked Ranboo's senses, and he quickly closed the door behind him. It slammed, and he froze in his tracks. He listened, he waited. When no one spoke or came running at him with a weapon, he allowed himself to sigh and breathe freely. For a few moments, he stood there, with his forehead pressed against the wood and his heart pounding in his chest. He was only trying to put off the inevitable. Shakily, he turned around.

The downstairs of the cabin was dark, and cluttered with mess spilling out from the chests and piled on top of the available surfaces. So many different weapons – ranging from swords to crossbows – were hung up on the walls and lying in the corners. Nothing out of the ordinary. The only thing that Ranboo didn't expect was the sheer amount of gold pouring out of one of the other chests. Rings, bracelets, chalices, coins, armour and even crowns were sprinkled across the shadowed floor, like the stars in the night sky. And lying down, bundled in furs and outlined by the warm fire, was The Blade, sleeping in front of the hearth and surrounded by his mounds of riches.

It shouldn't have surprised him. The Blade, although not a naturally born piglin from the Nether, was still cursed by their physiology and often craved sweltering warmth. The hybrid could even guess that his piglin nature was what drew The Blade into hoarding so much gold in the first place.

Ranboo blinked at the scene. He had never seen The Blade asleep before. He was imposing; a heavy mass letting out small snorts and loud snores, surrounded by gems and riches like a slumbering dragon from the tales of old. The piglin, although asleep, still radiated absolute power, and danger.

The hybrid gulped down the fear that started to overcome him. He trod lightly, sneaking over to the piglin with the agility of a cat. Stealth wasn't something that Ranboo was particularly good at, and The Blade would easily be able to attest to that fact in their training sessions. With his animalistic abilities, the piglin seemed to hear his apprentice sneak around from a mile away. Today, however, he barely stirred when Ranboo finally reached his spot, staring down at the menace.

He didn't want to look too long. He didn't want to have any other reason to turn back and abandon everything, but he did. His eyes lingered on the sleeping piglin, watching as his tusks glinted in the firelight. He looked peaceful and serene. For a blood-thirsty warrior who was constantly pestered by the voices in his head, it was rare.

The scene broke Ranboo's heart.

All evening, he had forced to refer to him as The Blade, at least in his mind. The Blade was ominous, and a name that struck fear into so many, but the bearer didn't like it. In fact, he despised it, as he would remind everyone on numerous occasions.

"It's dehumanizing," he'd grunt if any of his friends accidentally used it in front of him. "It labels me as nothing but an object, a weapon to be used by whoever has enough courage to wield it. A slave. A slave and a way to gain power. I won't be treated like that, never again."

That's exactly why Ranboo chose to use it that evening. He wanted to see the piglin as an object, something too material that he would feel no remorse getting rid of when the time inevitably came. Yet as he gazed down at the bundle beneath his feet, all those thoughts faded away. What was in front of him wasn't an object, or a slave of any sort.

What lay in front of him was very much alive. A fabled warrior, a hero, a mentor, and above all, a friend.

Ranboo didn't see The Blade.

He saw Techno.

The tears began to fall. Clapping a hand over his mouth, the hybrid sank into the wall, his tail curling around him, striving for some sort of comfort. It wasn't a question of whether to go through with the assassination or not, but if Ranboo would survive the mental aftermath.

It's so easy to kill someone.

In the midst of the hybrid's breakdown, Technoblade suddenly let out a loud, restless grunt. He rolled over onto his back, partially discarding the heavy furs, that were acting as the only armour between the assassin and the victim. Ranboo stared at Techno's bare chest, watching as it rose and fell slowly, with a loud heartbeat similar to that of a drum. The entire scene felt like an invitation. Ranboo almost gagged, but he had no choice. It was now or never, and never wasn't an option he wanted to explore.

With trembling, sweaty fingers, he drew out the dagger.

The blade, curved and sharp, twisted like a snake, ready to dive down and strike its target dead. The silver metal reflected the flames of the hearth as they spat and licked the stone around them, and the red tendrils of the grip spiralled around his fingers, cementing the dagger into his grasp. The whispers returned soon after, chaotic and gleeful, but now comprehensible. They chanted the same word over and over, with strange pronunciation and a foreign accent that he couldn't place even if he tried. They sent chills down Ranboo's spine.

Blood! Blood! Blood!

Were these whispers like Techno's voices? Is this what the piglin had to go through every day? If it was, Ranboo was ready to do anything to get rid of them, for both him and Techno. There was only one way he could grant them both deliverance.

It was rude to ask how many lives someone was on, especially when that "someone" was Technoblade. Hence Ranboo's original uncertainty at taking a life for the Eggpire. For all he knew, the strike of his blade could be Techno's last. But as the voices began to take over, his empathy for the warrior grew, as well as his confidence to do something about it. No matter what happened after the blade had struck its mark, however, one thing would always remain, one whisper of this fateful night.

Betrayal.

For what he was about to do, the hybrid was a traitor, and would be branded as one throughout history. He was almost certain that this event, this assassination, would not remain within the confines of the Antarctic Commune, but would inevitably seep out into the main lands to the South, and perhaps even further than that.

Ranboo would join the lists and ranks of the traitors that tainted the name of history.

His mouth went dry at that realization. In his hands hovering over the piglin's chest, the knife trembled violently. He would join the hated, the feared, and the power hungry psychopaths, of which he already knew a few names. They were traitors close to his friends, and some were even still alive and in positions of power or locked away. They had very different stories, very different morals, and very different events that had pulled their triggers, but they were all linked by the same, infamous last words. Words that Ranboo decided to adopt for that very moment.

Looming over his victim, he gazed at Techno one last time. He was still so peaceful, and seemingly untroubled. The hybrid hoped that he'd keep the same expression once he killed him. He lined up the shining blade, the sharp point glittering like the golden relics scattered around them.

He screwed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry Techno," he whispered, his sobs silent and discreet. He raised the dagger high over his head, ready to bring it down and break through the piglin's bones if he had to. "It was never meant to be."

He brought the blade down.

His tail knocked against a large, shining chalice, tipping it over. The golden coins inside poured out like a tinkling waterfall.

Everything happened all at once.

Before Ranboo even felt the dagger so much as scratch the surface of his target's chest, his stomach was struck by a powerful, gut wrenching kick. He tripped backwards with a pained wail, flailing the weapon around. He felt it slice something, as slick and as easily as butter, before his head collided with the wall.

The impact was sharp, and dazed him momentarily, before fading into an agonizing throb. The blade escaped from his hand, clattering to the floor with the gold and the jewels. As he was nursing his skull, Ranboo suddenly felt a cool, sharp object press against his neck. He gasped, panicking. Looking up, he crossed Technoblade's vicious, murderous glare. "WHO ARE Y—" he began, pressing the blade of his battle-axe deeper into the hybrid's skin. The piglin suddenly stopped. His expression changed from hostile to shocked. He leaned in closer, clearly taken aback by what he was seeing. "Ranboo?!"

"Techno!" Finally, Ranboo's vocal chords wanted to cooperate. He cried out the name as a reassurance.

He expected his mentor to drop the blade from his neck and help him to his feet. Techno didn't move a muscle. "What are you doing here? Why—" He interrupted himself again, dragging his eyes down to the floor. The hybrid followed his gaze, letting it fall onto the discarded dagger. His ears cocked when the distinct sound of liquid drops hammering against the floorboards. Following the sound, he inhaled sharply as he caught sight of the deep, gaping gash now decorating Techno's arm, crimson blood dripping onto the ground. That's what the blade must have caught on to, and thankfully, it was the only part of Techno that Ranboo had wounded. Or so he thought, until the

piglin spoke again. "Ranboo. What is the meaning of this?" Perhaps no more physical wounds had been inflicted, but this injury ran deep, and was audible in Techno's tone.

Ranboo began to beg. "Please Techno!" he breathed. "It's not what it looks like! I didn't mean to hurt you, it was for your own good, and I—"

"PHIL!"

Ranboo's blood froze in his veins. It was a cry for help, and if the hybrid knew one thing about about Philza, it was that he'd come charging in like a maniac and take care of the potential danger without a second thought. "For you, Techno, the world," the winged man would remind the piglin on the regular. Ranboo would be slaughtered where he stood with no questions asked.

The injured arm holding the axe to his throat was shaking, and slowly losing its iron grip. Despite the guilt gnawing him, he took the opportunity to rip the blade away by giving Techno a good, strong push. The piglin let out a cry of pain, and dropped his weapon. He immediately went to clutch his arm, finally taking proper notice of the gnash. His blood soaked through his fingertips as he tried to slow the blood flow. He bellowed again. "PHIL!"

Ranboo didn't wait a second longer. He bolted.

Slamming the door behind him, he came face to face with Philza and Sapnap, who had clearly awoken to the desperate shouts. "Ranboo! What's going on?" the winged man asked, grabbing his arm as he passed.

The hybrid didn't answer, and shoved both of them out of the way, before rushing down from the deck, past the kennels, and out into the wild tundra beyond. His legs were warm, on fire even, as he scrambled over the snow. His heart beat faster and faster, his panic still as vivid as it had been with Techno's axe at his throat. He began to tire, but he still kept pushing himself forwards, frantic.

The Commune's Nether portal glowed a dull purple in the distance. He trailed his hand down to the inside of his cloak. The memory book and the pages were still safely tucked within.

The Greater SMP's main librarian had been asked to print and publish all sorts of strange things in their lifetime. Books written by absolute nutcases, propaganda posters

for Manberg's dictator, newspapers that had only lasted a couple of months... They had done it all.

But this request, by far, was the strangest.

The librarian had been woken up at an unholy hour by three rapid knocks at the door of their business. Grumbling and muttering curses, they stumbled to the front door, ready to chase away a vagabond of some sort. But when they went outside, they saw nothing. Nothing, except for a neat pile of papers weighed down by a leather journal lying at their feet. A small note fluttered on top of the pile, along with a bag filled with coins and emerald shards.

There was no sign of who left these objects there.

The librarian read the note.

The translations are all there. Do what you will with this.

At first frowning, the librarian stooped to pick up the items, and began to read. Immediately, they paused, shocked by the first paragraph or so of the scribbled introduction that looked rushed, as if it had been written the same day in a frenzy. They checked around once again. This wasn't something someone would want to, or should, leave lying around in the open. No one was there. The only sounds to be heard were the chirping of the cicadas, and the hoots of a distant owl.

The librarian seriously considered disposing of these mysterious confessions, if only to protect this anonymous client from any repercussions that may follow. Then again, when anything was dropped in front of their business, it was to get published. And anyway, a client was a client, and this one had paid handsomely.

The librarian checked their pocket-watch. It was half past one in the morning.

They went back inside, and started working on the large printing press; arranging the letters, rolling ink on them, and pressing them into large sheets of soft parchment. They spent all night on the order. The client hadn't specified how many copies had to be made, but the author's note at the beginning suggested enough to cover the entire population of the Greater SMP, and beyond.

A client was a client, and the librarian respected their wishes, however absurd and ridiculous they were.

A few hours later, dawn broke. As everyone was waking up, the librarian did their rounds and dropped off hundreds of stacks of paper, all tied up with strings. Their associates around the realm then had the job of going around and delivering the individual, separate wads to every house and business in their vicinity.

It wasn't long before one copy landed in the paws of a certain cat, who was planning on giving the Egg a cordial, morning visit. He opened the front doors of the White Mansion, and immediately felt his foot hit something on the doorstep. Bending down, he picked it up, and peered at the title. Immediately, his red eyes went wide. "Holy..." He trailed off, and ran back inside.

As he made his way to one of the three large bedchambers, he flipped through the collection, breathing heavily and cursing under his breath. Eventually, he flung one of the doors open. "HOLY SHIT, BAD!" he yowled at the top of his lungs, bursting into a room richly decorated with red and black furnishings and curtains.

Comfortably buried beneath layers upon layers of velvets, furs and silk covers, the demon groggily raised his head from his pillow. "Language, Ant," he yawned, a little cranky. The four poster, mahogany bed he slept on creaked as he shifted. "What are you talking about?"

The cat wasted no time in scurrying to his bedside, and handed him the booklet. "He did it himself!"

"What?" Bad took the papers, and began absent-mindedly reading through them, still sleepy. But as time dragged on, he woke up more and more, his eyes widening just as Ant's had. "Oh my..."

"I can't believe he did that," the cat uttered in absolute disbelief. "It's..." He didn't even know how to describe it.

But Bad apparently did. Satisfied, he closed the cover, and smirked. "It's one less thing to worry about," he chuckled. "That's one less thing to worry about..."

Chapter Thirty: The Ender Pamphlet

I am far from who you think I am, and I am sick of hiding it. I have laid the facts as they are. I have kept everything as it is, not twisted, glorified or excused.

I want no pity. If you insist I must be applauded for something, it would be my courage and honesty to finally own up to everything I've done. There are things I don't remember doing. I have left small footnotes upon certain pages to elaborate on the confessions, as far as my recollection goes. These are not to excuse them, but to raise awareness about conditions and mental stages I know many like me cannot control.

Most of the charges against me involve connections with one certain prisoner of Pandora's Vault, about a friendship we both had together. Since what has been written in this confessional, there have been no further attempts to contact him or to try and infiltrate the prison. I do not have the ability to change the past, but I can help admit to what I've done to preserve the future.

After everything has come to light, and all my secrets spilled, I expect nothing else but the harshest of punishments, and I will comply willingly with the law.

"Sorry" is too small a word to properly apologize for these crimes, and so my ultimate submission to your wills and whims is all I can offer in order to right the wrongs committed.

I will not fight, not any more.

Ranboo

The actual title Ranboo gave it was "A Confession Of Crimes And Treachery".

Everyone else called it "The Ender Pamphlet".

The definition of a pamphlet, as everyone knew it, was; "a small booklet or leaflet containing information or arguments about a single subject".

Many of them had been published during the Manberg dictatorship, where Pogtopian revolutionary Wilbur Soot had spent countless hours writing up and anonymously sending off a great number of rude and mocking papers designed to deface and insult President Schlatt. Schlatt himself retaliated with the same kind of

writings, although with much less elegance and decorum. After that animosity was finally over – ending tragically in both their deaths – the pamphlet trend died out. Of course, a few circulated here and there on other subjects, but none that truly held any value. Usually, just small disputes between neighbors or merchants. Until now.

Ninety-five pages.

Ninety-five pages of confessions, notes and the contents of his memory book.

Ranboo hadn't given any arguments, or any words in his own defence. He didn't twist the facts. He didn't hide anything. All he did was leave every word as it was, every sentence, every paragraph, every page. It wasn't a simple pamphlet; it was a lengthy, truthful confession.

"Honesty is the best policy," people always used to say.

Ranboo had always believed it. Or at least, he had until he set foot on the Prime Path that day.

He had spent a rough night down in the L'Manberg crater, which was the only place he knew would be quiet enough to think things over and rest. Alone. He made sure to stay out of sight of the couple of smugglers trading wares in the dark caves, and kept an eye on the dangerously close creeper perched on a rocky ledge, until he fell into a troubled sleep. When dawn's first rays arrived, he stayed where he was, staring at the tattered L'Manberg flag planted in the middle of the lake. It wasn't the first time he had been outed as some sort of traitor.

The day before Doomsday came, Dream had revealed to the entirety of L'Manberg – as well as to members of the Badlands and the Greater SMP – that Ranboo had betrayed them. Everything was done with a wicked smile from both him and his mask. At the time, the hybrid was confused, until he remembered that his memory book had been moved to a different hiding place in his house, and he certainly wasn't the one who did it. Dream had known exactly what he was doing the whole time. That's what probably brought Ranboo's enderwalk side even closer to him, even when Dream was finally locked up in Pandora's Vault.

Ranboo hadn't done anything incriminating. Maybe he left a cabinet meeting once or twice when he suddenly had the urge to bury himself in his panic room, and he had apparently taken a few combat courses with Dream, unknowing. Then again, who was to say they were exclusively for self-defence.

The point was, Ranboo hadn't actually done anything wrong to hurt L'Manberg or Tubbo.

The people of L'Manberg, at first, were instantly outraged, until Tubbo, their president, managed to calm them down before a mob started. Even though the allegations couldn't be proven by anyone – Dream was a notoriously sly character, with a lot of experience in manipulation and the art of deceit – some would still cast the hybrid frequent looks of contempt and suspicion.

That only lasted for a day or so, as the Doomsday carnage soon erased everyone's memory of those questionable accusations against Ranboo – even wiping Ranboo's mind itself of them, although that wasn't a surprise to him, or to anyone else who knew of his memory problems. But this hole Ranboo had dug himself into wasn't any sort of baseless accusation made up to scare people into submission and spread fear that would make it easier to vanquish them, nor one that many would forget in a hurry as soon as a storm rolled around.

Everything was there, set in ink; how much more proof did he need to give them? What could be more persuasive than an honest confession of disloyalty, distrust and all round treachery written and signed by the perpetrator himself?

And of course, there was the question of why. Why did Ranboo do what he did? Why did he let the memory book be revealed to the world, like the confirmation of a strange conspiracy many had merely speculated about? Ranboo's honest answer to that question was something he would have never expected of himself. Then again, he didn't know himself in the slightest, and that was something he learned the hard way.

It was pride. It was fear. It was an instinct.

A group of people that Ranboo couldn't trust any more than himself was the Eggpire. Although their threats had seemed somewhat empty at first, and their smiles gleeful and persuasive, he had a feeling that assassinating Technoblade wouldn't have been enough to deter them from going through with their plans to frame him. And most likely, they'd either make him their good, terrified little errand boy – where he'd be reduced to doing their dirty work for them – or they'd twist the truth to horrifying magnitudes that the hybrid couldn't fathom. By telling everyone himself, Ranboo was breaking out of their shackles. He should have been free by now.

Then why did it feel like he was walking right back into a cage, this time of his own making?

His steps were slow and heavy. He felt like he was dragging himself down the Prime Path, with as much enthusiasm as a zombie. He couldn't feel anything, except a weight that numbed him completely from the inside out. The sky above him was a dull grey, clouded and threatening. A storm was brewing, but none that could ever have a more violent and sudden execution than the one Ranboo had stirred up himself.

He kept walking.

The wooden path creaked under his footsteps, every sound akin to a mocking chuckle.

He kept walking.

He found it a little strange that no one else was taking the road, until he risked a little glance upwards. He froze in his tracks, and so did the people who lined the streets. Their gazes were locked on the hybrid, their hands tightly gripping the copies of his pamphlet. Ranboo didn't know why he was surprised. Everyone had read it by now, and if they hadn't, they would have been told what was in it. A deafening silence filled the air, the tension cutting like a knife.

The people blinked at Ranboo. Ranboo blinked back.

And he kept walking.

Everyone who was present before him cleared a path, watching in horror as he passed by. Parents ushered their children away. Merchants hung on to their wares for dear life, as if the hybrid was about to leap towards them and destroy it all. All the others just watched. In his wake, the whispers started. They all probably thought they were being discreet, with the hushed gossip directed at their neighbours. But Ranboo managed to pick every single line up, as much as he didn't want to.

"A gentle, anxious giant" people had once called him. No more.

He would even take the slightly degrading term of "creature" that foreigners often used when they didn't know him.

He would have preferred anything, any term or name rather than the one they murmured behind his back.

"Monster"

And a monster he was. He just wished it wouldn't hurt as much when others said it. Every whisper of the word shot an arrow into his back, until he felt like his whole spine was impaled by identical, agonizing, sharp insults. He gripped his long ears, attempting to drown out the chatter, and kept his head low. His long limbs quickened the pace, desperately trying to leave the gossiping group behind. However, he was far from escaping the trials and tribulations of the public. It seemed that no matter which section of the Prime Path, or any other area, he veered off to, there was a similar crowd, and the cycles of silence and whispers would start all over again.

It was like a nightmare he couldn't wake up from, haunting him at every turn. He couldn't do this. He didn't know why he put himself through any of this. Already, he wasn't used to attention, but now it was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He wanted to scream and hide, but it seemed like every plausible escape was barred by horrified folk and the same insult thrown his way.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

He turned off again, crossing the Badlands' borders. The attention he got on the other side was just as unbearable and awful, along with the added issue of the Egg's most infected victims. Most of the chatter now belonged to people with bright red eyes that glowed like rubies, and they rose louder than mere whispers. There were even cackles and twisted sneers mixed in. It seemed that the Egg had given them some sort of gleeful courage the uninfected population didn't have.

Ranboo avoided them as best he could, staying close to the border and hurrying along there. Eventually, the jeering and the laughing were no more, replaced by the blowing of the moor's breeze, and the hybrid could finally breathe. Or so he thought. He inhaled a few times, shaky and uneven, trying to push down the panic rising in his whole body, when he suddenly heard the voice.

"Ranboo."

Tensing up, he raised his head. A few meters in front of him, Bad stood beside a few of the Egg's tendrils. In his claws, he held a copy of The Ender Pamphlet – as did everyone else. Ranboo gritted his teeth, trying to avoid lashing out and making his current situation any worse than it had to be.

The demon raised his eyebrows. "I never thought you had it in you."

The hybrid turned away, with only his tail translating the seething anger rising within him.

"You should have just taken our offer and killed Technoblade when you had the chance."

Ranboo turned back to him, startled. How did he know what happened the night before?

Bad could clearly read his expression, and smirked. "I have my ways," he hummed in response. Taking one last look at the pamphlet in his hands, he gently balanced it on the end of one of the vines, patting it like an obedient dog. "You could have avoided all this mess if you just had the guts to finish him off." He walked off.

Ranboo watched helplessly as the tendrils began to move, curling around the book and crushing it in their crimson, thorned grip. Perhaps that was a good thing: one of the many copies of his confessional was destroyed. Bad appeared to have got what he wanted, and had now left him alone. Alone, as everyone else had. There was nothing reassuring about it.

Everywhere he turned, contempt seemed to stare back at him. He couldn't avoid it, but he decided that the whispers of horror were much more bearable than the audible laughs and insane grins of victory, so he crossed back into the Greater SMP's territory. It wasn't long after that until he bumped into someone else. Someone he finally felt like he could trust enough to listen to him.

She was the only one on this section of the main wooden path, that lead to the Northern coastline. Heading in the opposite direction to him, away from the sea, their meeting seemed inevitable. For the first time all day, Ranboo opened his mouth to speak. "Puffy!" He watched as the captain stopped in her tracks, her head still bent and her tricorn covering her eyes. She didn't immediately cross his gaze. Ranboo didn't take it as a good sign, and gulped. Shaking, he reached out to her, before thinking better of it and recoiling. "I... I'm glad I've found someone to talk to..."

Captain Puffy was notorious for her banter and easy conversations. She was always the kind of person one would go to when times get tough and they just needed to have someone who would listen to them rant about whatever crossed their mind. The sheep herself didn't seem to mind in the slightest, and would often be the first one to initiate a talk when she realized that someone wasn't doing too good. That definitely added to

her motherly disposition, especially when it came to Tommy and the troubles he would always try to hide, or even Ranboo when he built up enough courage to open up a little.

But today, she said nothing. Finally raising her head, Ranboo managed to glimpse the look in her eyes. It was more powerful than all the terror and hate he had seen up until then. It was pain. Pure, agonizing pain, and severe disappointment. She kept the brim of her tricorn low, seemingly trying to shield him from her expression, but he saw it nonetheless. What had also struck him was the red rims around her eyes. They had nothing to do with the Egg, he knew that immediately. They were the remains of tears.

The hybrid trembled. "Puffy...?" He tried to ignore the pamphlet in her hands. "Puffy..."

"I was looking for you," she finally said, her voice shaking as much as Ranboo's hands were.

A small spark of hope suddenly lit inside Ranboo. "I was looking for you too." He finally lied, for the first time in what felt like ages. "I... I needed someone who would understand what I'm struggling to do here. This whole business, it's not what it looks like, I swear—"

"Ranboo." The sharp, dry reply, devoid of any sympathy, was not what he expected to hear. He shut his mouth immediately. "I'm not here for you."

The single, simple sentence she uttered was a strong blow to him and he backed away. "W-What...?" It sounded selfish, he knew, but he didn't know what else to say. Any hope of reassurance and comfort had been thrown out of the window in less than a single, brief moment.

Puffy turned her head away from him, trying to hide the glistening tears that the hybrid could still see trickle down her cheeks. "You've broken him, Ranboo. You've broken him completely..."

"I've..." He trailed off. Who? Out of all the people he knew to have wronged in his memory book, he couldn't guess which one she was referring to. At least, not straight away.

Finally, the captain raised her hat, letting him have a full view of her face. No longer swallowed in the shadows, she looked a mess. Although he still didn't know the person in particular she was referring to, he still saw that she was just as broken by his actions.

Making Captain Puffy herself cry burned a large, gaping hole in his heart, that was soon patched by the impending guilt he had been collecting for a while.

She sniffled a little, before taking a deep breath. "I know what it means to lose people you love," she began. "Not necessarily because of death, but sometimes just because of changes and decisions I will never understand. I thought there were only a couple of good people that loved me left in this land. People I knew, and loved back, and trusted over anything and anyone. You were one of them."

Were. His stomach dropped.

She continued, wiping her eyes. "As far as I can see, there is only one person I can trust now, and you've destroyed him. He was just starting to heal, and you... you..." She stifled a sob. "We were both trying to move on, and then you had to do this!" Angrily, she threw her copy of the pamphlet down onto the Prime Path. Ranboo watched her as she did, without making a single move to pick it up. "You had to suddenly reveal all this! And what for? To throw salt into the wound? To save your skin? What for, Ranboo?"

He couldn't answer. She had guessed one of the reasons already, and the reminder of his own cowardice revolted him.

The sheep lowered her voice to a strained whisper. "You will never find someone as trusting or as kind as him, and you decided to break him even more. You have no idea what he's going through. You have no idea what burdens he has to carry." She softened a little, although her fury still poisoned her tone. "You probably had a good reason to write and release this. You're not dumb, Ranboo, and I know you've always got good intentions, but I can't bring myself to trust you any more. I thought I knew you."

No one knows me.

"And between you and Sam, I have to choose the one I would entrust all three of my lives to. I'm standing by his side."

Sam.

Of course. He should have known sooner. Who else could he have broken more than the warden himself, with the information about who really caused Tommy's demise? His guilt turned into blood-curdling terror at the thought of Sam's reaction to seeing Ranboo again. Perhaps he would receive the mercy of a quick death. Yet if Puffy was anything to go by, then he was even more emotionally destroyed than she was. "So... He knows..."

"Of course he knows, Ranboo! Everyone does! Because of your mistakes!"

He fell silent again. "What about Tubbo?" he asked in a whisper, picturing his partner's horror and despair.

"He knows too. The whole of Snowchester knows."

He didn't expect anything less, and sighed deeply. What did Michael think of him? Did he even know what he had done? Would he ask questions when he'd find out that his father was hated? It hurt him to think about it. *And Tubbo...*? He didn't even want to go there. He nodded slowly. "I see..." he whispered.

"I hope whatever the reason for this confession was, it was worth it in the end. I hope you're satisfied."

With that, Captain Puffy brushed past him and left Ranboo alone, her brown and white streaked fleece darkening in the low light of the storm clouds. All the caring affection she once had for him and that he never really appreciated had seemingly disappeared in a flash, replaced by the cold slap of reality. Puffy knew where her loyalties lay, and Ranboo couldn't really blame her. At least she was honest with him. Honesty was so hard to pull off nowadays. He himself had just found out the hard way.

He peered into the distance. Pandora's Vault sat quietly in the sea, the clouds above it somewhat scarce and allowing a halo of light to grace its roof. It was as if the gods had decided to crown the prison with their divine light, sending Ranboo a sign.

He kicked the discarded copy of The Ender Pamphlet into a puddle on the side of the road, then continued down the path. Keeping his eyes down, he realized more and more pages were lining the streets, torn out by the anger and fury of the people. His confessions were turning into a chaotic mess at his feet, trampled by his own footsteps. He felt sick.

The prison grew closer and closer, as it had so many times before. Ranboo somehow knew it would be the last time he would be seeing it from the outside, while he could still smell the salty sea and breathe the fresh air. While he was still free. This time, he intended to stay in the Vault. Either as a prisoner, or until he gasped his final breath with a trident cutting through his throat.

The moment Ranboo stepped out of the Nether portal, he knew the confrontation wouldn't go well. The cold, clammy air of the Vault was suffocating, like a hangman's

rope tied around his neck. All he needed was to take the fall, and he would finally pay for his mistakes.

The fall was imminent.

At the other end of the room, the Warden of Pandora's Vault didn't acknowledge his presence. Ranboo swallowed hard. The noose tightened. His breaths echoed around the chamber, and he made sure to tread lightly. Every sound he made sounded like the loudest thing in the world, from the rustle of his cloak to the slight flick of one of his pointy ears. He finally stopped in front of the warden. He fiddled with his hands, his gaze nervous. It was deathly silent.

Sam didn't greet him. He didn't ask him to leave either. He sat there, back bent, his forehead resting on his clasped hand. In front of him, on the desk, sat the pamphlet, open at a double page. Ranboo knew which one one.

"S... Sam...?" he ventured. When he got no reply, he drew in a shaky breath.

Sam's eyes were glazed, and lost. He stared at nothing. His trident sat dangerously close to his hand. His elbows crumpled the corners of the collection of papers.

"If I could switch places with him," Ranboo murmured, the rope tightening even more. "I would. In a heartbeat."

"And have Tommy take your place?" The warden's tone was harsh, but shaky. "Have Tommy turn into what you've become?"

Ranboo had become a monster. He knew that, and he wished Sam had called him one instead of dancing around the term. It was almost respectful, as if the warden didn't want the hybrid to suffer any more than he already had. He suddenly prayed to be back outside and likely running from a furious mob armed with torches and pitchforks rather than alone with someone who, despite the pain he caused, still treated him with some sort of genuine care. He wanted to throw up, the inside of his mouth bitter.

Sam sat up, pushing the pamphlet away from him. "I don't understand..." he whispered. His voice cracked. The warden finally crossed the visitor's gaze. The hybrid felt his throat tighten as he stared into the tired, broken eyes. "Ranboo... Why didn't you tell me?"

Silence.

"I would have listened to you... if only you'd..." He trailed off. "Answer me..."

"I don't know, Sam..." Ranboo muttered, looking away.

There was a sudden bang as Sam brought his fists down onto the table. "ANSWER ME!" he yelled, standing up.

Ranboo turned back. "I don't know, Sam," he said louder.

Sam's eyes were wild and desperate, fury rising within them. He was breathing hard and trembling. His voice went up an octave, strained. "I just want to know why you didn't say anything..."

"I didn't know I did it," the hybrid replied. "It was the enderwalk and I—"

"The enderwalk..." The warden dragged his hand through his hair. "Right... The enderwalk..." He gestured to the pamphlet. "You knew enough to publish this, or did the enderwalk make you do that too?"

Was he mocking him? No, that wasn't like Sam.

Ranboo felt like he was simply pointing out how ridiculous everything sounded, and how the enderwalk could be interpreted as a feeble excuse, which of course Ranboo had never intended it to be. "I... I don't know..."

"Is that all you can say?" The man had suddenly turned serious, his tone as hard as the obsidian that made up the prison around them.

It was. It was all Ranboo could say. It was the only thing he knew was true. "It is..."

The warden took a deep breath. "How could it be, when you're the reason he's dead...? All this time, I blamed myself... But it was you. If you hadn't..." It seemed he couldn't even bring himself to speak of the action in question. "If you hadn't done what you did, Tommy would still be here."

He is! Ranboo wanted to shout, but he refrained from doing so. There was no point in aggravating Sam even more. He covered away when the warden left the desk, and strode towards one of the doors on the side of the room. "Get out of my sight..."

Ranboo snapped.

Everything that happened next happened in a blur. At first, Ranboo thought the enderwalk had taken hold of him once more, but soon realized that there was a clear difference between that and pure desperation.

His hands clawed the warden as he walked past him, and he sank to his knees. The rough, hard floor scraped his knees through his clothes. He held on to the dark green cape as hard as he could, bunching it up and holding the man back. His own heavy, winter-worthy cloak fanned out behind him like a peacock's tail, oversized and magnificent.

The hybrid's pleas were punctuated by sobs and almost incomprehensible, but he didn't care. "Sam!" he cried. "Please! I didn't mean anything I did!"

"Ranboo—"

"I've taken your help and your company for granted and..." He choked, his cheeks burning. "You were one of the only ones I could trust for a long time..."

"Shut up—"

"Please! Forgive me," he begged, nothing more than a crying mess at the warden's feet. "You're all I have now!" There was a long silence. "Lock me up, Sam. I beg you. Please!"

"Ranboo." Sam's voice was low and cold, cutting through the air like a knife. The hybrid didn't dare look up. "From this moment on, if I ever see you around the grounds of the prison or if you dare approach me, I will take all your remaining lives and hunt the ghost that remains."

Ranboo opened his eyes. Sam's cloak was yanked from his grasp, not that his fingers had any strength in them left to hold on any more. He looked up.

Sam's piercing green gaze bore into him, poisonous and hostile. "Get out of my sight."

Ranboo had no home any more. He had no place to stay. No one wanted him near them, and no one wanted to provide him any shelter.

Even the ender-folk turned their backs on him. Although he was one of their own, the Ender Pamphlet had defaced not only Ranboo, but those of his species who were

tied to the name of it. Already, the ender-folk had struggled to integrate society without hearing the rude whispers of others, but all those efforts had backfired once Ranboo published his confessional. Especially when it came to the enderwalking.

So the hybrid did what he had done all day.

He walked.

He crossed the Greater SMP once more, this time completely ignoring every insult and furtive glances thrown his way. He ambled down the Prime Path in a daze, barely even taking any notice of his surroundings. The burning, acid tear tracks scarred his cheeks. Ever since he could remember, he had tried to control his sobs to avoid the pain of the poisoned teardrops, the very same ones that now ran down his jaw. How ironic.

Once faced with the Nether portal, he entered and crossed the other dimension, coming out in the middle of one of the Antarctic Commune's blistering snowstorms. That was when he briefly woke up from his trance, realizing nothing awaited him back there but death and hate.

So he headed further North.

Ranboo had never explored the tundra beyond the Commune itself, as it was said to be a dangerous place when one was unprepared. He now knew why.

The frozen air whipped around him in icy blasts, tugging at his cloak and threatening to tear it from his shoulders. The long strands of his hair blew over his eyes, streaks of black and white flashing before him, and his tail fluttered out violently under his cape. Wrapping his spindly, shaking hands around himself, he held on to his only form of protection against the elements and carried on. As he continued, the snow became deeper and deeper, until it was up to his knees. Every step was heavy and uncomfortable, the inside of his boots and his legs soaked to the bone.

He trudged on despite everything, ignoring the hurt. It wasn't just the mental pain he was numbed from; his limbs were shaking from the cold weather, and were growing weary as he forced them through now waist-deep snow. He didn't care. He just wanted to get some distance between him and everything else.

Hours and hours passed, and still he walked on. He hadn't even given himself a break, and his refusal to swallow so much as a morsel of food since the evening before had taken its own toll. He carried on and on, pushing further into the unknown. Before long, the sky darkened, and the stars began to peek through the clouds scattered across

the heavens. The storms began to settle a little, their flakes now falling in shimmering, thin sheets. A lake stretched out for as far as the eye could see, its frozen surface reflecting the moon and the diamonds shimmering around it. In the distance, jagged ice peaks stretched towards the sky, sharp and ominous in the low light. The white landscape glowed like a freshly woven shroud, laid to rest upon a world devoid of all life.

It was at the bank of this great, iced mirror that Ranboo collapsed. His body – weak, hungry and tired – had given up on him completely, as had so many others.

The hybrid fell to the side, hitting and sinking into the ground. The snow around him caved in, pressing against his frozen, trembling self. The thick cloak he wore did very little to block it out, and served as nothing but an extra, heavy layer of cold and wetness that he didn't need. At first, Ranboo had tried to get up. With his shaking limbs, he tried to stand, only to fall immediately afterwards. He tried once more, with no success.

Eventually, he lay down. With his exposed skin burning from the wet snow, he lost all control and all feeling of himself. One by one, his muscles relaxed, numbed with the cold.

He could hear all the sounds around him start to fade away, except for the slow, rhythmic beating of his heart. Slowly, his eyes began to close, the pristine white landscape turning into nothing but a swirling blur. The last things he was aware of was the burning snow falling onto him from above, and seeing Michael, Tubbo and Tommy. Seeing them happy.

With a sigh, he gave in.

Chapter Thirty-One: Bringing Back The Golden Rose

Sam and Puffy had seen each other that very morning.

He had arrived at the Vault, much later than he would have wanted to. For a warden keeping guard over one of the most dangerous prisoners to have ever disgraced the land, he found that he was slacking off quite a bit when it came to his duties. He was apparently the only one who thought so, as the rumours of his heart of stone couldn't

have popped up from nowhere. He was feared and respected, but that wasn't a combination he particularly liked. Only a few knew who he truly was however, and in the end, that was all that really mattered. Right?

Even so, he still felt the need to keep up his stern reputation, at least when it came to the prison's security measures and the treatment of the prisoner inside.

However, when Fran's large puppy eyes and slobbering tongue demanded a morning stroll, he was too soft to say no. He just didn't expect it to last longer than it had – his beloved dog didn't necessarily have a good control on her instincts when it came to staying by his side. She ended up scrabbling up the rocky slopes around Sam's hideaway in pursuit of a herd of mountain goats.

By late morning, Sam was finally at the Vault, and busy unlocking the gates. That was until he spied a large booklet pushed through the bars and dropped on the other side. Curious, he finished fiddling with his keys, and picked it up. Before he could even read the title on the cover, it was snatched out of his hands.

"Don't read that," Puffy warned him, the wad of papers in her hand, along with a very similar copy she held under her arm.

Sam stared at her, then focused on the book again. "Why?" He reached out for it, only to have his friend step back.

"Trust me Sam," was all she said.

"I do. But now I'm even more curious than before." Before she could say anything else, Sam snatched his copy back, and held it out of her reach.

Looking back, it probably wasn't the most polite thing to do. Being so much shorter than him, Puffy struggled to try and take it back, cursing at him. "Sam, I swear—"

He held it even higher, and finally managed to read the title. It was surprising, but not too shocking. "A confession, huh?" he wondered out loud. "Interesting... I wonder if this means Dream will have a new cellmate..." His laugh and enthusiasm was forced. He didn't need another criminal to worry about.

"Sam, please." Captain Puffy had stopped trying to get it back from him, and instead gripped his arm, trying to get him to stay with her. "Don't read it."

"Why not?" He had already opened it, and his eyes were glued to the first page. The introduction, author's note, or whatever one wanted to call it wasn't too interesting at first glance. Sam skimmed through it. It was only when he reached the signed name underneath that he stopped.

Ranboo

Puffy's hand tightened around him. "Sam, just put it down," she begged him.

But he couldn't. Not any more. In a daze, he turned the page, and started reading. He scrutinized every line, every word choice, every meaningless list the pamphlet revealed. All the while, he made his way into the Vault, blindly shoving the keys into their locks, switching on the portals and raising the gates.

Every page sent a new wave of dread through Sam as they revealed their contents to him.

This was Ranboo's life. His own, *private* life. His secrets, his thoughts, his dreams. These were things Sam shouldn't be seeing, out of respect to the hybrid. He made a note to hunt down whoever thought it was a funny prank to publish all this, until he remembered who signed the nasty work of art he held in his hands. And nothing was more horrible than the important confessions he got to only a few pages in.

These supposedly incriminating passages started out not so badly; the first few were about a couple of friendly meetings with Dream when peace was somewhat stable between him and L'Manberg, after Tommy was exiled. There was nothing suspicious about that: many were on friendly terms with Dream at that point. Even Sam himself was partial to a drink or two with him at the time.

But as the confessions dragged on, the friendly meetings turned into training sessions, and concerning conversations regarding the state of the factions. Not long after that, the harmless talks turned into actions.

The day before Doomsday, the masses had gathered around the Community House, or at least what remained of it. Sam remembered the day well. At the time, he was adding the finishing touches to Pandora's Vault, and was busy negotiating a quartz order with a merchant. The transaction, however, was cut insanely short, as the warden soon found himself swept away by the panicked crowds, and had stopped in front of the carnage.

The moment he saw his beloved Community House in shambles, his heart had ached, as if someone had thrown a spear right through it. He wasn't the only one, as the small group of the eight original settlers all shared looks of disbelief. Ponk had even let out a choked sob in the middle of the shocked silence. But Dream was perhaps the angriest of them all, and the main confrontation between him and President Tubbo had taken place in the middle of the smoking debris.

It was their first home, and the oldest building in the entire realm. No matter what faction everyone was from or loyal to, everyone admired it. This was the house that had started what would evolve into a rich, prospering home. They would all be ready to drop their rivalries in order to defend it. Yet now, it was nothing but a pile of rubble shrouded by the insufferable, choking stench of gunpowder.

For a long time, the blame for the detonation fell on Tommy's shoulders, simply because he was a troublesome, exiled kid who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and who had been close with Wilbur Soot. From the beginning, Sam knew Tommy was innocent. He didn't know him too well back then, but he knew the boy enough to clear him. He was perhaps the only one who believed the boy's pleas of innocence.

Now, Ranboo's confessional cemented the guilt onto no one but the hybrid himself, under Dream's orders.

Dream's raging fury on that day had been nothing but an act, and everyone knew it now. He held no attachment to anything connected to the old life he, George, Sapnap, Ponk, Alyssa, Callahan, Bad and Sam had. It was all a farce designed to set up the Doomsday destruction that happened a mere twenty-one hours later. But now Ranboo was involved in the catastrophe, and was no more than the flame that lit the fuse.

Sam closed his eyes the moment he read the passage. He drew in a deep, shaky breath. Puffy was still by his side. "Sam, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he sighed. "Just give me a moment."

His request was met with silence, and for that he was thankful. He needed a couple of minutes to process what he had just learned.

"If you won't put me into Pandora's Vault, I'll make you..." Ranboo had threatened him the day before. Sam didn't take it too seriously, as he thought the hybrid wasn't reckless enough to do anything rash. Perhaps he would have stolen an apple and that would be it. The warden would have a small talk with Ranboo, reassure him that

everything was alright and that he was loved and not a danger to society, and that would be it. But this pamphlet changed everything he thought he knew about the young enderman hybrid.

Was the timing intentional?

Sam barely felt Puffy pry the book from his hands until it almost slipped away completely. He held on. "No," he told her. "I need to know more."

"You don't want to," she begged him. "Please Sam."

He didn't listen, and continued. They both came out the other side of the Nether portal entrance, now inside the Vault. The lobby was dark and gloomy, and the warden lit the redstone lamps. All the while, his eyes hadn't left the pages.

The pages seemed to go back to the normal, light-hearted memories after the Doomsday entries. A detailed story about how Michael was saved from the treacherous lava lakes of the Nether, a new relationship with Tubbo, concerns about Tommy... Sam was even touched to see a few paragraphs about himself and the kindness he gave that Ranboo didn't think he deserved. Despite everything, the warden allowed himself a small smile as he read the affectionate words and phrases the hybrid had used, even for the few insignificant entries where Sam had helped Ranboo find his way to the alchemist's or when he had helped him gather up a basket of fruit he had accidentally dropped on the Prime Path.

However, everything came crashing down when a good number of sentences later, another heinous crime was admitted to. It was a good year or so after the last one, and that had reassured Sam at first. Perhaps it was a "crime" of utter insignificance, like accidentally breaking a window or squashing a field of crops.

But it wasn't. It was something so much more serious.

Sam's mouth went dry as he read the first couple of sentences. The words, at first comprehensible, began to blur in his mind like a hurricane, jumbling up and out of order. He leaned on his desk to steady himself.

"Puffy." His friend's name came out strained and high-pitched, but he didn't care. He heard her trot over to him. He held out the pamphlet, aware that his arm was trembling violently. "Please tell me that this isn't what I think it is." He waited for the sheep to take it from him, as she had tried to do for the past half an hour or so, but she

didn't. She stayed back. From her silence, Sam already knew he wasn't mistaken, and that there was nothing good to come. "He didn't kill Tommy... He can't have..."

"Dream was the one who killed Tommy," she replied in a murmur. "No one else."

"But..." The warden let out a breathy chuckle, still in utter disbelief. "If the lockdown wasn't initiated, then it wouldn't have happened... If the disturbance on top of the prison didn't happen—"

"Sam, sit down."

But he didn't. He couldn't. He was still glued to the double page, reading everything over and over. He wanted to be mistaken, he wanted to have made an error. He wanted his paranoia to have taken over and have simply twisted the words in the worst way possible. He didn't want Ranboo to be that criminal accomplice he was so set on hunting down and murdering.

Ranboo. Strange, yet sweet Ranboo who wouldn't hurt a fly.

The footnote underneath the wall of text sealed Sam's worst fears. There had been many of them scattered throughout the pages, usually to add onto certain points that the hybrid had seemingly been comfortable enough with elaborating on. This footnote however held only three, simple words, but as soon as the warden read them, he crumbled.

Forgive me, Sam.

Sam couldn't feel anything after that, except for the hole in his chest, wide and gaping. Reading that single sentence was like ripping off a bandage and reopening a wound he had tried so long to conceal. He dropped to his knees at the foot of the desk, tears streaming down his cheeks. His trident dropped to the cold, dark floor with a loud clatter that rang in his ears.

Captain Puffy soon joined him, and the two hugged each other, their shared pain eating them both alive. For a long time, they said nothing, simply seeking comfort in

one another. But even that didn't seem to dull the blow. Nothing ever could. That written passage had cut them deeper than the sharpest of blades.

"I told you not to read it!" the captain suddenly cried, slamming an angry fist down on his golden armour. She had tried to conceal her sadness with anger, but failed. They both knew she was just as devastated.

Sam barely felt a thing, and held her tighter. "I know, and I'm sorry..." He took a deep breath, trying to control himself. It only made everything worse. His grip turned hard and claw-like. It was almost violent in nature. Was he trying to anchor down the only one he could still trust? Or was he trying to crush her completely to save her from the agony they were drowning in? The warden couldn't answer that. "I... I don't know what to do..." With another deep breath, he opened his eyes again. His tears had dried much quicker than he had expected them to. The words and revelations still whirled around in his mind, but he managed to numb them as best as he could. He looked down at his friend, who was still tightly clenching her fists against his armour. "Puffy, you shouldn't be here."

She raised her head, her eyes still wet. "What?"

Sam refused to cross her gaze, for fear of another outburst. "The prison. It's off limits to outsiders."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the captain's expression change from pained to puzzled. "You're sending me away?"

With a small nod, Sam helped her to her feet. "I am."

"I can't leave you alone," Puffy told him. She clung on. "Not like this."

"I'll be fine." His words were hollow, with no meaning or emotion. He felt nothing, and he had to admit, it felt nice.

"Sam—"

"Please. I need to get to work." He gently pried her fingers from him, only to have her try and hold on again.

Leaving each other alone hurt them both, and they knew it, but so did staying.

It had taken a long while, a bit of persuading and one last, teary-eyed hug, but Captain Puffy eventually left the Vault. Reluctantly, and in a bad state. Sam felt even

more guilty at having to push her away, but he had to. His rule of no visitors still stood. The prison was the one thing he could still control and count on, and he used that as his rock against the raging waves of grief that washed up against him.

Though instead of getting to work as he had told her he would, Sam sat down at his desk, and laid the pamphlet open at those infamous couple of pages. He stared at them long and hard. He read them over and over, until the movement became a second nature to him. Despite what was written in the pamphlet, despite Ranboo not excusing any of his actions, and despite how hard the warden tried, he could not hate him for what he did.

He had always pictured the perpetrator he hunted as a strong, capable warrior with questionable morals and a blood-curdling sneer, never as... well... someone as good-meaning and gentle as Ranboo. He couldn't hate him, no matter how hard he tried to.

And yet, when the hybrid in question entered the Vault later on to beg for his forgiveness, Sam lashed out in anger. He could hear the fury in his own tone, and he was fully aware of everything he said and did, yet he couldn't stop himself. His final words to the hybrid were spiteful and carried a vicious threat, and the terror in Ranboo's eyes as he said them had haunted him for the rest of the day.

He stormed off into one of the passageways, but instead of walking off, stayed until Ranboo left the prison's lobby. When he had, he ventured back into the room, his steps heavy and slow. He took out Tommy's golden compass from his enderchest, and stared at it for what seemed like hours. He didn't cry. He didn't think of the way it had materialized inside the prison, fixed, after supposedly being broken and lost to the lava. He just stared at it, dazzled by the reflections. He sat there for what seemed like the entire day.

Devoid of feeling.

Broken.

And angry.

But not against Ranboo.

In a flash, he was out of his seat, and grabbed his trident. His mask was not needed and he left it hanging over his chair. He stormed through the halls of Pandora's Vault, not paying any attention to anything except his destination. Not long after, he pulled

down the lava wall, and rode the moving bridge across the chasm. Now, he was in Dream's cell.

The first thing he did was walk up punch him square in the face.

"*That* was for Tommy," he growled, watching as the prisoner wiped his bleeding nostrils.

Dream looked up, his eyes watering from the blow. Without a sound, he reached for the bowl of warm water Sam had given him the day before to keep treating his injuries. The warden was quicker, and kicked it away. The fragile ceramic smashed against the walls, spilling its contents between the obsidian ridges.

As the criminal looked back at his jailer for an explanation, Sam punched him again. He felt a couple of bones crunch under his fist. "And *that*," he snarled. "Is for whatever you did to Ranboo!"

"What are you talking about?" Dream finally piped up, wincing as he gently touched his nose bridge. It kept bleeding, dripping onto his prison uniform.

Sam made no move to help in any way. Instead, he picked him up by the collar of his shirt, and shoved him against the wall. Staring into the prisoner's eyes, all Sam could see was indifference in them. That made him even angrier. "Don't lie to me!" he spat. "You know perfectly well what I mean!"

"Oh, I know about Tommy," he hummed, nonchalant. "Obviously."

"And I think you know exactly what I mean with Ranboo too, don't you?"

"Ranboo, Ranboo..." Dream's face twisted into a pensive expression. He shrugged. "Doesn't ring a bell, I'm afraid."

The prisoner didn't even act like he was trying to convince the warden, or took anything he said or did seriously. Sam tightened his grip on his collar. "What did you do to him?" he demanded, hoisting him up higher. He could see some of the more recent and deeper cuts Quackity had inflicted reopen and start to bleed, but he couldn't care less.

Dream raised an eyebrow, unimpressed and clearly tired of the vague questions his jailer was spouting out. "Fine, yes; I mentored Ranboo for a while, in a way. So what?"

Sam didn't want to tell him all the details, so he revealed only what was important to the current situation. "You know that security breach that locked Tommy in here? *Ranboo* was the one who caused it, trying to get *you* out!"

Dream snapped his fingers. "Of course it was! I should have known. The enderwalk state makes him do really strange things." He smirked. "You'd think I was the best thing to happen to him since sliced bread!"

Sam was far from smiling. "Shut up."

"You're the one asking me all the questions," the prisoner replied, sniffing through his broken nose. "I'm simply telling you what I think."

"Do you want to know what I think, Dream?"

"Not particularly, no."

The warden let go of the prisoner, who slid back down to the floor. He barely flinched as his wounds scraped against the floor and the walls, now probably used to the relentless pain from his daily torture. "I think that I should kill you right now." He held his trident up to the prisoner's neck.

"Really?" Dream glanced from the prongs at his throat up to Sam's face.

"Yes, really. *Ranboo* was trying to break into the prison, and was quite likely ordered by you to do so." Now he was bringing in the prison protocol, he was getting more and more confident. These were rules and truths written in ink. "Therefore, you have tried to escape, Dream. You have one life left, and I will gladly rip it from you right here and right now."

He waited for Dream to beg for mercy. He waited for him to break down in tears, or even just stifle a terrorized gasp. But no. Dream laughed.

It wasn't the loud and gleeful cackle that had echoed around the Vault when Tommy's blood had stained his fists, or the quiet and sinister chuckle that hid a web of lies and violent plans during his time of past freedom.

It was a genuine laugh, as if Sam had just told him the funniest joke in the world. It was Dream's *real* laugh. Sam remembered it all too well. The first time he had heard it was years ago, when Ponk had made a particularly lewd joke about Bad, which

prompted angry, embarrassed yells of "Language!" and a roar of laughter from everyone else. And above all the chuckles, one rose louder than any other.

"Oh, I think the tea's ready," George had smirked as Dream doubled over, sides splitting. His shrill wheeze, no different from the piercing whistle of a kettle, kept ringing. The man seemed to have the lungs the size of barrels to be able to keep going without losing his breath.

Sam hadn't heard that wheeze since he had left their settlement oh so long ago. Now, it was back, exactly how it used to be. Loud, piercing, and nostalgic. The warden suddenly found himself wishing that they were both out of the Vault, and back plucking fowl together under the late evening sun, while the crystal lake gently lapped against the foundations of the Community House. The longing for times long gone still hurt him. But those moments were in the past. That version of Dream had vanished, and it wasn't going to come back.

Sam turned his full attention back to the laughing prisoner. "What?"

Dream paused briefly, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. "You've really forgotten, haven't you?"

"Forgotten? Forgotten what?"

"Why you put me in here in the first place, and why you didn't kill me when you all had the chance!" He wheezed again. "Sam, I genuinely thought that when I killed Tommy, you would immediately come to me, but you didn't!"

Sam shook his head to clear his thoughts. Dream was confusing him, and he could no longer think straight. "Forgotten what? You're not making any sense!"

"Frankly, I'm astounded!"

"You tell me right now!" Sam yelled, pulling him by his hair and yanking his grinning face up to him. Any harder, and the warden was certain that he'd snap his neck. Not that he would have minded doing so.

Yet Dream didn't seem fazed. "Sam, I can bring Tommy back."

He smirked again. Sam let go. Stepping back, the warden observed the criminal. Sitting comfortably against the wall, Dream stared back. He clearly knew he had shaken

the warden, and was eager to see what happened next. "Why do you seem so surprised?"

"I..." Sam knew he should have just spat at him, and stabbed him right there and then. But Dream's sudden reminder washed over him like a wave of frozen water. He didn't know what to say.

"When you came to collect Tommy's body, you almost killed me. I stopped you by saying that I could bring Tommy back, but you didn't take me up on the offer. You thought I was lying." To emphasize his point, Dream pulled down the collar of his prison uniform. The pus-filled, gooey scabs from his trident wound were once more brought to the dim light, although the warden took no notice. That painful, painful day was starting to come back to him in fragments of heartache and deep sorrow.

"I..." Sam was still lost for words. He let his trident fall from his grasp. It clattered to the floor, and the noise brought him back to his senses. Almost. He scrambled to pick it up, actively snatching it out of the prisoner's reach.

There was seemingly no need for his frustration, however, as Dream barely moved. All he did was tilt his head curiously, like a goofy little puppy. "Sam?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," the warden shot back immediately, with as much confidence as he could muster. Whether he was trying to convince the criminal or himself, he didn't know. He leaned his forearm against the wall. "I just... I need a minute."

"Sit down," Dream offered, gesturing to one of the drier parts of his darkened cell.

In any other case, Sam would have adamantly refused to do so – especially when it was the criminal himself who suggested it – but today, he complied. Keeping a firm hold on his weapon, the warden slumped against the obsidian. As he sank down to the floor, the ridges and jagged edges scraped his golden armour, leaving thin white scratches all down his back. Beside him, Sam now noticed, balanced against the wall, sat the small bouquet of yellow roses their mysterious sender had left at the Vault for Dream. They definitely looked much worse for wear now, with their petals fraying and their stems drying out. But with the way their cut ends were all soaking in the shallow puddle below them, it was clear that Dream had tried to take care of them with the limited resources at his disposal.

Sam didn't know why he was so surprised. The flowers most likely came from someone Dream cared – or used to care – about. And sure, Dream was a monster, one

who felt no remorse and held no sentimental attachments to anything or anyone, but his cell must have looked a lot brighter when the roses were still healthy. The warden couldn't exactly blame him for wanting to preserve them.

The prisoner followed his gaze, and smiled. "They lasted for a while," he told him. "But everything dies one day or another." The yellow roses were wilting, as every other living thing in this prison was. "I tried to bring them back."

Bring them back... Dream had failed with the yellow flowers, that much was clear. But there was still – maybe, possibly – one other dead, golden rose he *could* bring back to life.

Sam spoke up after what felt like years of alternating between stutters and silence. "Dream–"

"Yes?"

"I want you to be honest with me." The warden struggled to continue, unsure of what he was about to say. "I want you to tell the truth. Not under threats or pressure, but as the man who was once my friend."

"I thought those days were gone. You said so yourself."

"They are, and they'll never come back. But that doesn't mean the taste of what we used to have can't appear for a moment."

"Maybe you should go and kill a couple of pheasants for us to pluck," Dream chuckled. "Make it authentic."

Sam felt like he should have laughed, or smiled, or shown some form of sympathy and friendship. Something that could prove his words. Yet this was the man who had killed so many, including one Sam deeply cared for and tried to protect as best he could. He could never forgive Dream for that, no matter their past, present or future together. So he kept his stern look on his face. "I want a simple "yes" or "no" answer," he said coldly. "And I'll only ask you once." He took a deep breath. "Can you bring Tommy back?"

"Yes."

That was the first time in years that Sam knew and felt for certain that Dream was telling the truth. The reply was short, but honest. He didn't know how he knew; he just *knew*, deep down in his bones. "You're telling the truth."

"Why would I lie to you?"

"Why *wouldn't* you lie to me?"

"I never lie when I have something to get out of it."

That too, Sam reluctantly realized, was an honest answer. He didn't expect anything less from the criminal than wanting to bargain for his services. Then again, why should Sam trade with him, especially to attempt to fix an unspeakable evil *Dream* had committed? "What you get out of it is me not killing you."

"That's true, but you need me, no matter what."

The warden was quick to retort. "I could just make you give me the book and be done with you." He paused. "It makes me wonder why I haven't done that before."

"Because the book doesn't exist."

Sam perked up. "What?" He narrowed his eyes. "You said you could bring Tommy back." Was the criminal playing yet another mind game? If so, Sam was ashamed of himself for falling into it.

But from what Dream said next, he wasn't. "It did exist, once. Schlatt gave it to me in exchange for my support on November 16th, and I kept it for quite a while. Why did he of all people have it in his possession, and how?" He shrugged. "Good question, but I couldn't tell you. What's important is that he did, and he gave it to me."

"Hurry up," Sam pressed. Now there was a hope of seeing Tommy again, every moment without working towards bringing him back seemed wasted. And the warden's patience was running as thin as the cut marks slashed across Dream's skin.

"You think I'd leave that book to rot in an enderchest?" Dream scoffed. "Of course not. I studied it. I learned everything it had to offer, and when I finally felt like I could recite it from cover to cover, I burned it."

"You *burned* it?"

"Of course. Why would I have kept it as an attachment to be used against me?" He tapped the side of his head, poking his fingers through his curtains of greasy, dirty blond hair. "It's all in here. I should also thank you Sam; my time in the prison has given me the chance to revise a little."

Sam got straight to the point. "You're telling me that if I kill you, the knowledge will be gone?"

"And that no one will ever be revived when their last life is up if you do? Yes, yes I am."

The warden had to give credit where credit was due: Dream was smart. Maybe not in the same way Sam was with redstone and whatnot, but the prisoner was just as intelligent. Cunning, even. Burning the book and thus assuring that his own, final life would remain untouched was a good move. It was as if Dream was treating everything he had and all his actions as a game of chess, and he was always one step ahead.

And so was Sam right then. One step ahead. "You're not getting out of here," he quickly interjected, just before the demand came out of the prisoner's mouth.

Dream nodded. "I know. I'm not that dumb, Sam."

"Then what do you want?"

The criminal grinned. "You're taking me up on my offer?"

Sam quickly shut him down. "It depends on what you want in return. I won't agree to anything unreasonable."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you," Dream hummed. "Fine, first of all, I want water."

"Water?"

"To wash. I smell like a decaying corpse, and I even have the look to match one."

Sam didn't want to mention Dream's body odour – which was much more prominent now that the warden didn't have his mask on – but now that it was brought up, it was impossible to brush aside. "That can be done," Sam assured him. For the first time since Dream had entered the prison, he was ready to be somewhat lenient with him and his living conditions.

Dream smiled, seemingly in relief. "Great."

"Is that all?"

"No. I want Quackity to stop the torture."

It was another reasonable enough demand for someone to make. Any chance to stop their own torture would be taken at the first opportunity. Sam, however, was starting to grow a little sceptical. "He'll never agree."

"Then make him."

"I will not take orders from you," Sam hissed. He hesitated. "But I will try." Again, it was a smaller price to pay than he had expected, and he was prepared to comply.

"For Tommy, yes you will."

"Shut up." He would not give Dream the satisfaction of using this supposed revival scheme against him. "Is that all?"

"Not quite," the prisoner replied, and Sam rolled his eyes.

"How many more things do you want? You're fixing a mess you made, and you're not a king. These aren't favours given to you out of the goodness of my heart."

"Easy there, I only ask for one final request."

"Go on..."

"I want visits to resume."

Sam scoffed at that. "Visits? What for? So you can pick off people one by one, beat them to death, then blackmail me with reviving them to gain more favours?"

"Interesting idea, but no. Do you know what it's like to be locked in a dark room for days, weeks and months on end without seeing the sunlight?"

The warden hesitated. He was shackled to the Vault as well, and spent most of his time patrolling its walls. "Yes. Yes I do."

"No you don't, Sam. You have no idea. I can't remember the last time I've seen the world outside." Dream turned to the withering flowers next to his jailer. "Whoever left

that bouquet has given me my first glimpse of the outside in ages. And I thank them for that. I had even started to forget what flowers looked like until these came..." He turned back to Sam. "Letting receive visitors will keep me from going insane in here."

The warden had learned that an insane Dream was not a safe Dream, and that was what finally pushed him to agree. Partially. "I'll give you three visits," he said. "Choose wisely."

He expected Dream to try to haggle further with him, but it seemed like this arrangement was more than satisfactory to him. "Three is more than enough," he said.

Sam nodded. "Alright... Water, Quackity, visits," he checked again. "Nothing else?"

"Nothing else," the criminal confirmed. "That's all I really need."

Sam stood up. His legs were numb from the long sit, and the uncomfortable sensation of pins and needles crawled around the soles of his feet. "You're much more agreeable than usual," he remarked.

"I could say the same for you," Dream grinned, staying where he was.

"When can you start the process?"

"The revival, you mean? When I've got what I wanted."

"What? You expect me to please you before you keep your side of the bargain?" Sam was shocked at his arrogance.

Dream shrugged. "If you want to see Tommy again, yes."

Sam hated this. He hated having to bow to the prisoner's whims and wants. But Dream was right. If he wanted to see Tommy again, to hold him in his arms and to hear him laugh, he was ready to do anything and make any compromise. Within reason and his abilities, of course. Dream was the puppet master once again, tugging on the strings and writing the script others followed to their own detriment. Sam only had one advantage over him.

Sam was the one who controlled the big, black theatre Dream performed in.

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Bee Boy

Tommy's interactions with others up until then had all been amicable and good natured, albeit a little awkward at times.

He didn't know what it felt like when someone got angry at him. He knew what being feared felt like, and he hated it. Was anger any different? He hadn't done anything worthy of angering someone, or so he thought. That thought seemed to fade little by little as Tommy clambered back up to the path above the lava lakes of the place Ranboo called the "Nether". At first, he had gone back to the spot he had last remembered seeing Ranboo. His strange, tall friend wasn't there.

That was what made Tommy finally snap and start to search much more frantically. He didn't know how long he spent in the deliciously warm, steaming dimension, simply searching for his friend.

Or was he even his friend any more? Maybe the reason why Ranboo was gone was because he was angry at Tommy.

The phantom had left him without so much as a tap on the shoulder to let him know where he was. But the lava was so inviting and seeing large, glowing expanses of it only made it more tempting to him... He just had to go, and that's exactly what he did. For hours, he floated around in the warm, orange substance, aimlessly drifting off into light, dreamless slumbers.

The lava inside Pandora's Vault was lovely, but raw lava from this strange world, in the wild, felt even better. He could have stayed there forever, if Ranboo's excitement hadn't dawned back into his mind. Ranboo wanted him to meet Tubbo. At that moment, Tommy had decided to go back up and apologize in some way. What he had done – leaving his side to go and bask in the lava – was selfish of him.

But when Ranboo was no longer there, he began to panic. Where was he? Where did he go? Was he alright? Was he looking for Tommy? Was he simply angry at him, and chose to leave him alone? The worst possible scenarios began to spin around his mind like a whirlwind, and he kept searching.

As was shown with his idle time in the lava, Tommy had no concept of time, or apparently distance. A peak of red rock in the distance that he thought Ranboo could be hiding behind was in fact much closer than he thought it was, or what looked like a short track through a forest of twisted, warped trees would in fact take hours to clamber along. The Nether was starting to feel more and more like his first few days in the Vault,

where he spent his time wandering the tight halls and frantically searching for any sign of life. The cavernous walls of the red, rocky world seemed to close in around him, and he wanted to scream for help until his throat exploded. Even the lava bore more resemblance to a death trap than a cosy, warm blanket now.

Eventually, the claustrophobic conditions – whether they were real or all just in his head – became too much, and Tommy's searching soon focused on getting out of the Nether as soon as he possibly could. He ended up turning back after scampering over the fiery wilderness and following one of the large, much more civilized, cobbled paths, which led him – he assumed – to one of the many magical, purple portals, like the one Ranboo had taken him through. Without a second thought, he stepped through alongside some merchants, and came out on the other side.

The frozen weather hit him like a slap to the face, making him wince and hide his face. In stark contrast to the Nether, it was bitterly cold, and Tommy felt like his feet had frozen to the spot. What sort of place would be so evil as to have such a sudden change of temperature?

Tommy looked up from the pearly white snow beneath his feet. In front of him, polished stone walls drew a dark grey line across the horizon, wriggly and uneven as they snaked over the hilly landscape. They weren't even half as high as the Vault's walls, but were still imposing as they loomed over his thin, pale figure. Round watchtowers sat at the corners with bright fires at their tops, like shimmering stars held captive as makeshift lanterns.

The ghost fell in line with the other people heading towards the walls along the icy, pothole-ridden road. There weren't many travellers, at least compared to the usual crowds that lined the Prime Path, and the phantom liked it. He craned his neck as he passed under a high, arched entrance, and paid no attention to the guards at the gates.

The world beyond was something straight out of a fairytale. It had awoken something within the boy; the buried memories of age old legends and stories that once ran free in his mind. The town before him – which the idle chatter around him called Snowchester – belonged in those fantasy stories Tommy soon began to recall.

The winding cobbled streets were the perfect scene for parades and royal processions cantering by on horseback, crushing freshly strewn flowers under golden hoofs and heavy boots, and the cosy-looking houses that were alight with lanterns looked like the childhood homes of the simple heroes that rose to greatness. The taverns were loud and boisterous, and the perfect place for a company to have one last, hopeful drink together before setting off on a journey many would never return from.

And the ships in the harbour, in another life, would belong to vicious pirates thirsty for treasure and blood. The hulls creaked as they were rocked by the waves, the barnacles stuck to them likely carrying the stories of a thousand journeys Tommy could only dream of embarking on.

He stared up at the billowing masts and the seagulls that weaved in and out of the ropes. Their cries were no different from those that flew above Pandora's Vault, although the boy wondered how they could bear such a frozen landscape. In fact, how could *anything* bear this weather, living or not? Stray snowflakes occasionally drifted from the cold grey sky into Tommy's transparent self, and the startling, burning pain would make him jump.

How did the fields of blooming crops lining the shores even survive, let alone grow? Tommy didn't know much, but he knew that was not normal.

The few farmers that were hoeing the ground seemed to be doing so naturally, as if nothing was amiss in the slightest. As they brushed the snow off a few of the crops, Tommy could see that they were brown and withered. The farmers would then take out a vial, let a couple of pink drops fall onto the plants, then move on. They did that routinely, and the crops they left in their wake were soon back to a ripe, healthy green. It was quite unnatural but if it worked for them, who was Tommy to judge? It wasn't like he was going to be the one ingesting the food they were spraying.

In fact, he didn't really care. Why would he? He hadn't eaten anything since... since... He couldn't even remember *that*. Anyway, the boats and the other bits of snowy scenery were much more fascinating to him.

He turned back to the harbour just in time to see a small figure push past him. He jumped back in fright, before remembering that no one could see him, or at least, those who didn't look hard enough. Tommy wouldn't have paid any attention to the stranger, thinking it was just another one of the many people who crossed his path and never saw him, if it wasn't for the cry of one of the farmers from the fields.

"Tubbo!"

He stopped in his tracks, and so did Tommy. Both of them turned in unison, the stranger to the farmer, and the ghost to the stranger.

"What is it?"

"Are the bees alright?"

Tubbo crossed his arms. "They're fine. Why are you asking?"

The farmer fiddled with his hoe and the brim of his hat. "Just wonderin'..." he muttered.

"That's the first time you've ever "wondered" about them."

That seemed to push the farmer to finally crack. "Have you seen what Ranboo's done?"

Tommy's attention was finally turned from Tubbo to the farmer. Ranboo. Ranboo, they knew Ranboo. Where was he, and what had he done? From the way the conversation went next, it was nothing good.

Tubbo huffed. "Yes, yes I did."

"And...?"

"And what? What do you want?"

"Well, what do you have to say about it?"

"What is this, an interrogation? I don't have to say anything about it. In fact, I don't *want* to say anything about it." His tone was icy and spiteful, and made Tommy recoil. "Good day." He stormed off.

From that first introduction alone, Tubbo was clearly not a friendly character, or one that wanted to waste his time explaining himself to others. Anyone with any sense would have left him alone and get on with their day.

But not Tommy.

He had travelled too far and had wasted too much time to simply turn back, so like a persistent little toddler, he followed Tubbo.

Tubbo was surprisingly quick, trotting over the icy cobbles with ease, but Tommy had no trouble keeping up. His long legs let him walk as normally as he could, and he was soon stepping by Tubbo's side. He took the opportunity to get a better look at him.

Tubbo was so much shorter than Tommy, and that was obvious at first glance. Looking down, all the ghost could see was the top of his head, covered by a mop of messy brown hair. Two long, floppy ears sprung out from either side of his head, and

Tommy was instantly reminded of Friend. If Tommy listened closely, he could even hear the faint tapping of hooves against the soles of his boots as they hit the cobbles.

Tubbo was a sheep, or a ram, or a lamb, or whatever. Not only physically: he was temperamental, quick, and clearly frightened by something. Tommy didn't know what.

After a few minutes, they arrived at the outskirts of Snowchester. The homes were much more spaced out, and the paths were less well-kept than perhaps they should have been. A small, domed building rose up in front of them, and Tubbo trotted up to the front door. He wiped part of the snow off the glass, and hesitated.

Tommy didn't know why at first, until Tubbo turned around. His forehead and eyes were covered by a thick brown fringe, and all the phantom could see was his mouth, twisted in confusion.

Tommy held his breath. Was this... did he...? His heart began to beat faster and faster. Against his better judgement, he gave Tubbo a little, tentative wave.

Tubbo stared his way. Then he turned around and opened the door of the domed building, before disappearing inside.

Tommy let his arm drop. Did Tubbo see him? Did he not? Was he ignoring him? He didn't know, as usual, and it began to frustrate him greatly. He made his way up to the dome as well, and peered through the glass Tubbo had cleared.

His senses were violently hit when he saw what was inside, and he almost reeled back. The inside of the dome was lush and green, without a single drop of snow in sight. Bushes laden with blackberries lined the walls, and the ground was covered in a carpet of flowers of every kind, from orchids to daisies. It was a harsh contrast from the rest of the frozen landscape outside, and it was almost magical. In fact, it *was* magical, and added on to Tommy's fantasy stories he had been telling himself lately.

Tubbo was sitting on a bench in the middle of the dome, that looked very much like the one Tommy had near his own home. The sheep's feet dangled off the ground, and he was busy kicking them back and forth. His boots had slipped off, and had finally revealed his legs, covered in brown fur and tipped with polished black hooves.

At first Tommy was confused by Tubbo's silently moving lips, until he noticed the myriad of tiny, buzzing insects swarming around him. They seemed to land everywhere on him, from his hair to the tip of his hooves. Bees.

Bees were very scary to Tommy. He had only seen one or two of them before, but the way they buzzed towards him and darted around in circles unsettled him in a way he couldn't explain. Tubbo, in comparison, seemed to be in his element. That passive smile Tommy had seen had grown to twice its size and melted the coldness and sternness that once plagued it.

Tommy kept staring at Tubbo's mouth as it spoke and grinned. Was he singing to the bees? A lullaby, maybe? He treated every single, individual one that landed on his fingers softly and courteously. He was in a dream of his own, in a little glass bubble wedged in between snowdrifts and a harsh, cold world out there. And Tommy was outside, not inside with Tubbo.

He frowned, wistfully gazing at the bee boy he barely even knew. He needed answers, and there was only one person he knew he could go to. It wasn't like he had moved anywhere since.

When Tommy arrived back at Pandora's Vault, the portals were lit. Someone was in there. He froze momentarily, unsure whether to go in through the entrance, or wait for Ghostbur the next day and travel to the island itself in a boat. He didn't want to have to phase through the walls again, however, and that was what finally made him venture into the lit Nether portals. With enough luck, the foyer would be deserted, and he could venture to Dream's cell without any awkward encounters on the way. Yet there was only so much luck someone, especially a ghost, could have.

Upon stumbling out the other side, Tommy immediately found himself staring into the back of someone. He ducked out of the way just in time, as an axe came swinging towards his face. It stopped just in time, resting on a shoulder. Tommy escaped to a corner, where he then watched the confrontation from afar.

The first figure with the axe he had bumped into was one he hadn't seen before. He was short, with jet black hair covered by a wool hat similar to Ghostbur's, and a sparkling navy blue and silver outfit that shone as bright as the stars.

The second was the golden-clad guard Tommy had seen around so often.

Sam.

Tommy had no idea why he remembered his name, and why just his name. Nothing else. That one day he had seen him by his bench – and the same day he took his discs – was the day the name came back to him. The phantom in fact still somewhat

resented him for that act of "theft", and wondered if there was a way he could get his music back.

But even if he could talk, he wouldn't have dared approach Sam to ask him. Not only was he clearly the king of this dark, obsidian prison, but he was also intimidating, physically.

Even now, he towered over the stranger with a straight back and a piercing glare. From the way his trident was gripped in his hand and the way their voices were raised, Tommy knew that their encounter wasn't a friendly one.

"You can't do this," the stranger spat out, squaring up to the other.

"I think you'll find that I can," Sam replied, his tone as cold as Snowchester's snowy landscape. "I am the warden of this prison, and everything I say goes."

"Not this. This doesn't. We had a deal—"

"And *you* agreed that I was the ultimate authority on the grounds of this prison. You gave me your word, Quackity."

"So did you!"

"You *made* me agree to this plan of yours! I would have never let you visit if I knew what you were going to do to him!"

"I thought you would have loved to see him suffer, after everything he's done to you and to—"

One sharp movement from Sam's trident stopped Quackity mid-sentence. "Don't you *dare* use his death against me ever again. I'm done with your guilt-tripping," he hissed, before pointing to the huge Nether portal behind them. "Get out, and don't come back."

Tommy watched as Quackity's face went from speechless shock, to red-faced anger. "He has something I need. These visits are important to Las Nevadas," he growled, just loud enough that the ghost could still hear him. "Would you turn on it? On us? On our partnership? You're my associate, Sam—"

"If this is what being an associate of Las Nevadas entails, then I don't want any part of it." Every one of Sam's replies were just as cold and collected as the last, and sent a shiver up Tommy's whole body. "I have things I care about more, and partnerships that

actually matter to me. I am happier here than I will ever be in your casino and strip clubs."

Quackity paused again, once more speechless, before his expression changed again. "You've talked to him, haven't you?" he suddenly asked. "He's manipulated you into stopping me from coming, hasn't he—"

"This is my decision, and my decision alone. Now get out, and I want those hotel blueprints back. I should never have given them to you in the first place."

"You've changed, Sam," the other sighed, narrowing his eyes. He turned away, and Tommy was momentarily startled by the long, deep scar stretching across the left side of his face he now got to see, and the golden nugget of a tooth that peeped out from behind the scowl. Quackity's exit was remarkably composed despite what he had just said, but the ghost could still feel the frustration radiating from him.

Sam just stood there for a while, staring at the spot where Quackity once stood. Then he exhaled. It was a sigh of relief.

Tommy wanted to wait until Sam left before continuing his trek, but soon realized that the warden was going the exact same way as he was. Towards Clay. Although Tommy sort of knew the general layout of Pandora's Vault, he still didn't trust himself to wander off and find another path, and he soon found himself following Sam. He had only done so once before, and almost scared the warden to death merely by touching him, so he made sure to leave a decently large distance between them.

The sight of the warden's back was familiar to him now, and instead of scrutinizing the details as he had before, he decided to think. Think, and try to answer some questions himself, one of them being: if Sam was the warden of this place, why didn't he save Tommy?

Tommy figured out that he had died in Pandora's Vault. It took him a while to finally find the connection and when he did, he was much less disturbed than perhaps he should have been. If anything, he was relieved that he finally knew something about his life, or death, or whatever. It brought him a strange sense of peace. But as he walked behind Sam, another question came to haunt him.

Why didn't Sam save him?

He wanted to ask him right now, when he had the chance. He would have, if only he could talk without lighting his whole body on fire and crying silently through the pain

that would follow. He balled up his fists, seething as he forced himself to keep quiet once again. It happened often, too often. This time, he was so frustrated that he angrily kicked part of the warden's green cape when it happened to trail at foot-height. It was petty, it was unnecessary, and it was childish, but it still felt good to do.

Yet still, Sam took no notice of the boy.

Finally, they reached the familiar curtain of lava dividing Clay's black room from the rest of the Vault. Sam pulled it down after shoving one of the many keys in a lock.

However, now Tommy had no way to float or swim across. His only way of getting over the gaping chasm was on the moving bridge he had been so afraid of the first time he saw Sam use it. But he had no other choice. He followed the warden even closer, barely a hair's length away from him, and stepped on the platform.

It was small and cramped, but Tommy still managed to make it work without touching Sam in the slightest. The moving bridge was loud and kept jolting as it chugged along. Tommy didn't like it. It muddled his senses, and once or twice, he thought about jumping off to avoid the incessant grinding and squealing in his ears. He wanted to grab onto something, but that something happened to be Sam. He resisted.

When the bridge finally touched the edge of the obsidian box, Tommy scampered onto the black rock. He had never been so happy to touch the dark, damp walls before.

"Well?"

Tommy looked up at the sound of Clay's voice. At first, he thought he was being addressed, until Sam spoke up. "Quackity isn't coming back."

Tommy squinted into the darkness. He hadn't been inside the Vault for so long, and his eyes had no longer adjusted to the darkness of it. Clay's voice was disembodied, and he couldn't even see the back of the room.

But he could certainly hear him smile. "That's good. That's very good."

The shift in Sam's stance said otherwise. "Do you have the list?"

"Yes." There was a crinkle as a sheet of paper was taken out from somewhere, and Sam was soon swallowed up by the shadows as he went to get it.

It was a hot minute before the warden spoke again. "Are you sure?"

"Sure about what?"

"These people," Sam replied.

"Is there a problem?" Clay asked.

There was a slight moment of hesitation. "No, there isn't."

"I know you're lying. You're scared that they won't be safe."

"Shouldn't I be?"

"I chose them because I would never harm a hair on any of their heads. I thought of you and your worry as a warden."

"How considerate of you." Tommy could tell the reply was sarcastic, and it made him bristle. Surely, Clay was genuinely thinking of Sam's well-being. The ghost didn't know the context of their conversation, and he felt like he never would. "How do you know they'll want to come and see you?"

"You're the smart one, Sam. You'll persuade them."

Tommy expected another retort from the warden, or another sarcastic response, but instead, Sam emerged from the darkness, his hand creasing the paper Clay had apparently handed him. His expression was indecipherable to the phantom, and the boy thought it best to not look into it. The warden marched past Tommy, and back onto the bridge.

That was when Clay spoke again. "Sam."

He turned around. "What?"

Feet shuffled against the hard, bumpy floor, and Clay stepped into the light. He was smiling, but he had a glint in his eyes Tommy had never remembered seeing before. He looked... happier. And cleaner too. The long locks of dirty, greasy blond were combed and were now tied back in a bun. His skin had also been cleared of the grime that used to caked him from head to toe. Yet the ghost could tell that Sam wasn't settled by any of it, the happiness or the cleanliness.

But Tommy was. He was relieved. He wanted to go and give his friend a big hug, even though he felt that Clay wasn't a huggable sort of person. The man spoke. "I see you've made a new friend!"

Both Sam and Tommy paused. Sam was clearly the one spoken too, but Clay was looking *directly* at Tommy. The phantom was confused.

So, it seemed, was Sam. "A new friend? What are you talking about?"

Clay's expression wavered ever so slightly. He glanced from Tommy up to Sam, then back down to the ghost. His smile faltered a little, then came back bigger and brighter than ever. "My mistake," he said, following up his statement with a chuckle. "Just going a little loopy in here, that's all."

Sam didn't leave right away. He stared at the blond man for another minute or two, before shaking his head. "Loopy... yeah..." he muttered. He glanced at the paper one last time, scanning the messy handwriting, before he slipped it into his golden armour. "I'll see you... at some point."

Clay sent him off with a little salute. "See you at some point!" Once the warden's back was turned, he looked back at Tommy, and pressed a finger to his lips. "Wait," he mouthed, his eyes following Sam as he made his way back across the lava chasm. A few minutes later, the fiery divide came cascading back down, and they were cut off from the rest of the Vault. Clay grinned from ear to ear. "Tommy!"

The boy smiled back. Finally, he felt like he could relax, at least a little. He nodded.

Clay sighed. "It's been ages since I've seen you..."

At that, the phantom felt a pang of guilt. He had been so caught up with his own life— death, or whatever, that he had all but forgotten about his first friend. He looked away, wrapping his arms around himself. *Sorry.*

"Well, you're here now!" he said.

Tommy nodded again, looking up. He wanted to ask his friend so many questions, but he felt like Clay would do all the talking today. As usual.

"The flowers are wonderful, Tommy. They really brighten up the place!"

He was being praised, and a warm, mellow sensations enveloped him. It was just as comforting as the lava. Getting those flowers for Clay was a mark of their friendship, and one that Tommy still treasured.

"They did wither after a while though."

The ghost frowned.

"But that doesn't matter, because the brightest of all the flowers is back!"

The ghost smiled again.

Clay's way of speaking had always been strange, and somewhat deceptive at first hear, but Tommy truly missed it. He missed being smiled at without fear, or confusion. He was being praised instead of questioned relentlessly. He liked that and of course, Clay looked much, much better than he had before. That was an added bonus. Although much had changed, some things never would, and Clay sat back down against the back wall, in his usual spot. Tommy followed him. "So," the man began, getting more comfortable. "Why are you back?"

Tommy didn't understand.

"You've been outside, haven't you? Why would you want to come back here?"

Because I feel safe. He couldn't explain it exactly. After long moments of reflection, he realized that the outside was a scary place, and that although the walls of Pandora's Vault were dark and sometimes cramped, he felt safe. Perfectly secure. That was probably why Clay stayed in there too. Then he remembered. He remembered the real reason why he came back to his friend.

He looked around him, and finally found the pile of damp, discarded journals. He picked one up, and tore out a page. Maybe he should have asked Clay first, but something told him that he wouldn't mind. The scribbles in the journals were all nonsense anyway. The phantom dipped his finger in the gooey purple liquid running down the walls, and got to work.

He still hadn't written anything in ages, the last word being Clay's name, and even then, he had a feeling that he messed up somewhere. So this time, he took particular care with his script, tracing one letter at a time, and only moving on when it was perfect, at least to his own eyes. He barely paid attention to Clay's rambles, sticking his tongue out in deep concentration.

"Did you notice by the way? Sam is letting me wash." Clay sniffed under his armpit. "I smell wonderful," he sighed wistfully.

Yes, of course. Tommy did notice. He didn't couldn't smell however, and perhaps that was a good thing. Now Clay was cleaner and taking care of himself, he looked a lot less frightening and crazed.

"I'm also getting a few visits too, so that's pretty pogchamp."

Tommy looked up. *Pogchamp?*

Clay chuckled. "You used to say that all the time," he told him, then began listing off variations of the word. "Pogchamp, poggers, pog... I think we all picked it up from you at one point or another."

Tommy nodded slowly, and finished tracing the last symbol of his masterpiece. He stepped back and looked at him. It looked pretty "poggers" to him.

TELL ME ABOUT TUBBO?

That was clear enough to get his message across, right? He handed the page to Clay.

His friend took a moment to read the question, then smiled widely. "Oh, Tommy..." he hummed, putting it to one side. He sighed, gazing up at the ceiling. "Tubbo... Well, it's a long story..." Tommy's spark of hope diminished. What happened? Was it bad? Was Tubbo bad? His suspicions however were soon erased when Clay gave him a coy little grin. "Do you want to hear it?"

Tommy nodded eagerly.

"Well, we're going to have to tell a much larger story before we get to Tubbo," he said, nonchalant. "There are a few points here and there that we have to discuss first, and some that we might need to forget for the time being. I might need to abbreviate some parts, brush over a few details and..." He trailed off, watching the phantom. Tommy shuffled closer, and sat down on the floor, head in his hands. He watched as Clay smiled again. "Fine, I guess you're that eager to hear everything. This should be a breeze."

Clay began his tale.

To recall every single word Clay told would be an impossible feat, as there were so many and arranged in so many different ways. There were even quite a few Tommy

didn't understand, but he managed to figure out a definition for each one as the tale got told.

Clay didn't talk about Tubbo right away. First, he told Tommy the tale of a great nation that one sat only a little while away from the boy's own house in the hill. A nation founded on a strange concept called "democracy" and that promised freedom to its inhabitants. It sounded magical, and Clay was a *good* storyteller. His words weaved together a beautiful picture Tommy would have never dreamed up himself with his limited imagination and inexperience with the world around him.

His friend told him of heroes in that country that continued to be heroes for ever and ever. Tubbo was one of them, and Tommy was proud of him.

Tubbo's story wasn't one that Tommy had expected it to be. Elections, spying, loyalty, and eventually running this great nation. It was the most "poggers" thing Tommy had ever heard. Tommy however wasn't mentioned at all, except for one sentence. "*Tubbo's best friend*." That was more than enough for him, and he was happy with that. He wanted to know about Tubbo, not himself.

Was Clay sugar-coating these tales he told? Possibly, very possibly. But weren't all fairytales exaggerated, in the end?

He didn't care about that, but he did care that the stories were long. Interesting and fantastic, but still long, and Tommy's eyes began to flutter shut. He scooted closer and closer to Clay, and finally found himself lying against him, his arms wrapped around his waist and his head resting against his chest. He didn't think Clay was a huggable sort of person, but when he chuckled softly and began to stroke his light, ghostly hair, Tommy felt secure.

Secure, warm and, quite possibly, loved.

For the first time in what felt like forever, he began to fall into a deep, peaceful slumber, the last thing he remembered being Clay's slightly out of tune humming lulling him to sleep with a song about that great, magical nation.

With the gentle words of "My L'Manberg" echoing in his ears, the golden rose soon slipped into a pleasant dream about snowflakes, pirate ships, and the bee boy in the glass bubble.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Piece Of Cake

"Any sign of him?"

"Nothing." Sapnap stomped his boots on the floor, getting rid of the snow. "Not even footprints. It's like he disappeared into thin air."

Technoblade fell silent, staring back out the window. Sapnap also decided to stay quiet, careful not to accidentally disturb the piglin. The cabin was cold, and the fire had dwindled out hours ago. The fireborn warrior tentatively stepped over the masses of gold piled around the room to go light it again.

Suddenly, Techno let out a loud, booming roar of pain, and Phil shoved him down into a seat. "Hold still!" he muttered, needle and thread aloft. "Of course it's going to hurt if you keep moving, mate!"

Technoblade grumbled something under his breath, but nevertheless held up his injured arm.

Sapnap had seen many battle wounds in his life, and many accidental cuts, gnashes and amputations. But this wound Techno had sustained was the strangest he had seen thus far. What kind of cut never seemed to heal, and still bled hours and hours after it was dealt, without even drying or scabbing in any way? Especially when it was given to a warrior with skin as thick as leather, like Technoblade.

Philza, fortunately, seemed to know what he was doing, and had changed the bandages regularly since the attack. He remained calm, composed and gentle, even though Techno wasn't. Even now, with a sharp needle in hand, he tried to sew up the gnash with as little hassle as possible, occasionally whispering into his friend's ear or letting him bite down on anything he could reach – even if that "something" was the end of Phil's busted wings.

One of his crow companions graciously cut the thread with its sharp beak, and he stepped back. "There! Done!"

Techno mumbled something along the lines of a thank you, then turned to Sapnap. "Are you sure you haven't seen him anywhere?" he asked again.

With a sigh, Sapnap put his protective gloves back on, the fire in the hearth now blazing. "Positive." He hesitated before continuing. "I'm worried."

"As am I," the piglin replied. He looked down at his arm. Even from the floor, Sapnap could still see the wound bleed, soaking the newly tied thread with a dark crimson colour. Techno looked just as puzzled as everyone else was, although he definitely did a better job at hiding it.

Sapnap finally decided to say something. "Why is it still bleeding?"

The piglin shot him a glare. "What do I look like, a doctor?" he growled.

"That's enough, both of you!" Phil stepped in, wrapping up Techno's wound in a fresh layer of bandages. "It's bleeding, full stop. There's nothing more to it!"

"I'm sorry," Techno said with a sigh. "I'm just tired..."

Sapnap had wanted to look strong and capable, especially when faced with The Blade, but now Techno had cracked, so did he. "I'm tired too." No one had slept a wink for the past couple of nights, too busy fretting over Techno's injury or worried sick about Ranboo. Sapnap's stomach knotted as he pictured the worst. "I don't know where else to look," he said.

"Have you tried the Greater SMP? The Badlands?"

"I already sent Nikki a message," Phil butted in. "I explained roughly what happened, and asked her to keep an eye out for him."

"And...?"

"She thought she saw him, but she couldn't be sure." Phil handed Techno a booklet. "She sent this back with her note."

Sapnap peered over Techno's shoulder. "A Confession Of Crimes And Treachery" was printed on the front cover. That didn't bode well for what was inside.

Technoblade knew it too. "Oh Ranboo..." he murmured, opening it to the first page. He reached for his glasses, and winced as his wound was stretched. Sapnap got them for him, and then let him read in peace. He himself couldn't bear the thought of seeing what was in this mysterious pamphlet.

He turned to Phil. "So, she *thought* she saw Ranboo?"

The winged man nodded, stretching his obsidian black wings. "That's what she said."

"How could she not be sure? Ranboo looks like Ranboo."

"It's not exactly like she could wander out to check and not get heckled," Phil reminded Sapnap. "She's too sweet to be put through another round of hate."

The fireborn warrior reluctantly agreed. Burning down the L'Mantree – L'Manberg's oldest tree and one of the most precious things to the nation – as her final stand against tyranny and her final goodbye to her home was simultaneously the best and worst decision of her life, and the repercussions of that event still haunted her reputation to this day. Although his own relationship with Nikki was very tense, Sapnap had to agree that she didn't deserve a single speck of the contempt she got. People just had to grow up and let it slide instead of relentlessly twittering about it like birds and blowing it way out of proportion, in his humble opinion. "Well, we can't go and check for her, can we?"

Phil shrugged, at a loss of what to do. "We can't," he agreed. "We're all outlaws in one way or another."

"Outlaw is a strong word," Technoblade finally spoke, his eyes still glued to the booklet in his hands. "We're just a group of individuals that don't adhere to the norms and rules of the society we live in and are thus excluded and shunned for it." Sapnap always thought that Techno's reading glasses suddenly gave him a burst of intellectual dialect and the ego of a dragon. This was the proof. The piglin closed the book. "And now Ranboo is one of us." He waved it in front of their faces. "This probably turned into a scandal back on the mainland."

"You can't have read it all already."

"I didn't, and I won't. And neither will you."

Before anyone could stop him, Technoblade threw the book into the fireplace. The red and orange flames began to lick at the edges tentatively, before swallowing it up completely and charring it black. Before long, the paper pamphlet was no more than ashes, whisked away by the spitting, roaring fire.

All three of them just watched it burn, and an air of relief descended over them all. Techno breathed out. "It's done."

"That contained things from Ranboo's memory book, didn't it?" Sapnap guessed.

"It did. But it doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter."

"Was it bad?"

A moment passed before Techno took his glasses off. "As I said, it doesn't matter."

Sapnap couldn't hold it in any longer. He couldn't understand Techno's mindset. "But you chased him off!" he exclaimed. "He attacked you! He tried to kill you!"

"He did. But I didn't understand why at first, until I took a closer look at the dagger." He picked up something from behind a pile of gold, and held it up to Sapnap and Phil. It shone a bright silver, with a jagged, wavy blade. Red vines wrapped around the hilt of it, and had started snaking down to the point. The blade itself was stained with the remains of dried blood.

Sapnap stepped back. "The Egg," he breathed, eyes wide.

"The Egg," Technoblade agreed with a grunt. "This dagger doesn't belong to Ranboo."

"How do you know?"

"Sap, I gave him all his weapons and armour. This was definitely not one of them."

Sapnap couldn't argue with that. "How did he get it then, and how did the Egg—"

"Here's what I think happened." Techno began to pace. "Ranboo had a run-in with the Eggpire, who then threatened him with information they had on him—"

"Blackmail? They would do that?"

"I'm talking, Sapnap."

"Sorry."

"They wanted him to kill me, and, fearing that whatever would come out would destroy his life and those of others, Ranboo complied. But he failed. I woke up, scared him off, and realizing that the Eggpire would go through with their threat, Ranboo decided to tell everyone himself."

"That's... elaborate," Sapnap said, somewhat sceptical.

"They're elaborate people. I know how tyrannies work." He paused. "And I know what Ranboo would do."

"But blackmailing and threatening a kid?" Sapnap said. "That's insane!"

"As if it hasn't been done before," the piglin replied, with an eye roll and a slight bitterness to his tone.

Sapnap, again, couldn't disagree with what was being said. He changed the subject. "So, if Ranboo had actually stabbed you with that dagger..." He risked a look at Techno's arm. A bloodstain from the incurable wound was already starting to form through the bandages. It had barely been ten minutes.

The piglin seemed to know what he was thinking. "I wouldn't survive, no matter how many lives I'd have."

"How many do you have?"

From the horrified glare Sapnap got from both Techno and Philza, he knew he had messed up. Big time. He shut his mouth.

"I have enough," Techno said, his reply vague and cold.

Sapnap took a cautious step back. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I just..." He trailed off, then sighed. "I'm not thinking straight, I'm sorry. I'm worried about Ranboo and every extra bit of information can help us find him."

"Well." Techno held up the dagger. "He's not going to be anywhere near the Egg, that's for sure."

"Why not?" Philza suddenly piped up, voice hushed and his eyes glued to the weapon and the vines that covered it. Sapnap couldn't figure out what the look on his face was, but he didn't like it. "He might find the vines comforting..."

Another silence fell over them, and Sapnap and Techno shared a look. "He won't." The piglin walked over to a nearby chest, opened it, and put the dagger inside. He locked it shut. "No one is to touch that, no matter what."

Sapnap knew for a fact that Techno's warning wasn't addressed to him, and looked over at Phil. The winged man wistfully gazed at the chest for a few moments, before supposedly regaining his senses and shaking his head. Before long, he was back to normal. "So, not the Eggpire," he said, just as thoughtful and worried as ever. Every trace of his previous, strange episode had been erased, and they all seemed to want to move on from it.

"Not the Eggpire," Techno agreed. "So the Badlands are off the list."

"What about the Greater SMP?" Phil suggested.

Techno shook his head again. "Too many people, and his confession wouldn't have gone unnoticed. That rules out the SMP, Snowchester, Las Nevadas, and Kinoko."

"Wait, why not Snowchester? Isn't that where Tubbo and Michael live?"

"Ranboo wouldn't go to them. He'd be scared, either of getting rejected or accidentally hurting them."

Sapnap couldn't get over Techno's certainty. "How can you be so sure? He's a complicated guy."

"I know him. Not in the way you might think, though," Techno told him, gazing out of the window. "I've mentored him. I know how he fights, how he strategises, and how he ultimately wants to flee when the time comes." He paused. "I also know that his favourite food is chocolate cake, but that's not too important right now."

Technoblade was right. You didn't have to talk to someone to get to know them in some way. Watching Ranboo fight and seeing how he thinks in the moment could reveal a mountain of knowledge to those who paid close attention. Sometimes, talking to the person simply wasn't enough. Actions and words could frequently contradict each other.

Karl had already proved that. Sapnap's gut wrenched, and he barely paid attention to what Phil and Techno were discussing.

"Ranboo's smart, Phil. Even if he didn't think he had, he would have thought through his exile."

"What do you mean?"

"The Southern, Eastern and Western lands are too crowded and populated, and he doesn't have a boat to cross the oceans. The Nether is out of the question too; you know how much he hates the lava there. That means, the only way he could have gone is—"

"—North." Phil paused. "Would he though?"

"Why not? No way to trace him, no villages or settlements for days and days... That's where he's gone. I'm sure of it."

"But even we haven't explored that far, Techno! It's too dangerous. We'd be lucky to find Ranboo intact—"

"We can take the sleds," Sapnap suddenly interjected, finally finding his voice. As his hosts turned to look at him, he tried to compose himself. "It'll be a lot safer if we do and we could cover a lot more ground." His stomach was still spinning uncontrollably from the memories of Kinoko's betrayal, and he was eager to get out. And find Ranboo as well, of course.

Thankfully, Techno seemed to agree to his plan, and nodded. "That's a good idea." He reached for his thick winter cloak. "Let's go."

"Oh no you don't!" In a flash, Phil had dragged the piglin back to a chair by the fire, firmly yanking him down. "You're injured. You're staying here."

Sapnap waited for Techno to snap back and lash out, but instead, all he said was; "I've had worse." He didn't make any move to stand up again, although he let his head sag. In humiliation, Sapnap imagined, as he was being treated like a sick kid.

Technoblade being too injured for a mission? That was unheard of, and downright impossible. Being all but babied and ordered around clearly didn't suit him in the slightest.

The piglin waved them both away, dismissive. "Go ahead, and stay safe."

The fresh, bitter air of the tundra was just what Sapnap needed. He let it fill his lungs until they ached, ready to burst. He couldn't care less if they did. The sky was clear and blue, without a single cloud in sight, and the breeze was far more mellow than it usually was, whistling gently instead of tearing at the clothes on his back and whipping across his face.

Half an hour later, Sapnap and Phil geared up, and two sleds, each pulled by a team of six dogs, flew across the white landscape, merely two specks of grime on a much larger, cleaner canvas. The runners hissed against the ground and cut deep, thin lines in the crystalline snow, with the twelve dogs pounding over the tundra in surprising synchronicity.

The dogs Techno kept in the kennels were the best of the best, or so he kept saying. Broad shouldered, strong and with mean, little slits for eyes, they were almost the spitting image of their master. Their thick, grey pelts stretched over their toned muscles, and their feet were easily the size of a human hand. They were much less like dogs, and rather more like hell-hounds from the religious texts, or wolves. That didn't mean that they couldn't have their calm, playful moments however, in the presence of those belonging to the Syndicate. The teams of canines were fast too, and the world around the two sleds whizzed past in a blur of sparkling white and jagged grey scratches.

Sapnap's eyes were narrowed all throughout the journey, trying to wince against the blasts of icy air jabbing at him. Although there were worse places to hide out in than the tundra, there were many of its weather conditions that Sapnap would never get used to, no matter how much he tried. Even his piping hot body temperature rarely did anything to help him.

His hands gripped the handle bar of the curved sled tighter, and he forced himself to stare at the backs of the hounds pulling him along. Their powerful bodies rose and fell like the ocean waves, and the thundering of their paws were matched by their loud, breathless howls and barks that echoed off the rocky slopes looming over them. Sapnap couldn't take his eyes off the dogs, a forgotten longing creeping back into his mind. He squeezed the handle even tighter, channelling all his bloodthirsty desires into the sled, letting them drift away in his wake.

He promised Technoblade he had changed, that he wouldn't harm a single, innocent animal ever again. He intended to keep that promise.

Though if he told himself that there weren't some moments where he pictured his sword slashing clean through waves upon waves of these hounds' ancestors with a macabre fondness, he'd be lying. The animal blood he used to spill and drench his feet in made him feel alive, much more alive than he ever thought he could be. Without that, he felt closer to death. Although, perhaps that wasn't a bad thing. Death could be just as magnificent and wondrous as life, and held mysteries of its own he could only dream of discovering one day.

Sapnap snapped out of his daydream. It wasn't right. It wasn't safe. And he soon realized that it wasn't needed. Whether dead or alive, all he wanted was to feel happy. And he was happy in the tundra.

Dead or alive. He didn't care.

He rocked his sled ever so slightly, and the hounds changed direction. They veered off towards the second group of wolves, and began to rush alongside them. Their pace was much more moderated now, and they playfully snapped at the dogs on Phil's team.

Sapnap, still balancing precariously on the back of the wooden runners, unwrapped the scarf around his face. For the first time in a couple of hours, his lips stung in the frozen air, smoke curling out from under them like a dragon's. He took a deep breath, finally breathing in something other than the stuffy stench of woollen fabric, then glanced at his companion.

Philza's neck was craned up at the clear, spotless blanket above them, the rim of his hat fluttering and threatening to rip off his head entirely. His eyes matched the colour of the sky; a sharp, ice blue that could jab at one's self as hard as a frozen spear, although they were not unfriendly. His gaze was warm, too warm perhaps considering that the outcome of their current mission was uncertain and not looking good. He even had a smile on his face.

Sapnap followed his eyes up to the heavens. Phil's army of crows flew many feet above them, forming perfect, orderly lines across the blue sky. They were soldiers, ready and awaiting their general's command. But their general in question had already given them one.

"It's been ages," Sapnap commented, raising his voice to drown out the cacophony of barking, blasting wind, and flapping of clothes.

"The crows know what they're doing," Phil replied, his eyes never leaving the birds.

Philza's crows were clearly not like the normal ones that would lurk around in other places. They had pledged some form of loyalty to the man with wings as black and as magnificent as their own, and him to them. Their bond was something Sapnap didn't – and would never – understand, and he hated to be that one, sceptical outsider who asked too many questions. But with a mission as important as this one, Sapnap wanted to put his trust in something other than a flock of passerine birds. "Are you sure?"

"Mate, just because animals only talk to you in barks and growls doesn't mean that they don't talk to me differently. They know what they're doing."

"But would Ranboo really travel this far out?" Sapnap asked, still doubting Phil and his cult. "He's just a kid."

"You know full well that being a kid doesn't mean anything any more," Philza replied. "He would absolutely run this far out." To the fireborn's surprise, he chuckled. "I bet that if we ever threw him a surprise birthday party and scared him half to death, he'd run all the way past Las Nevadas and beyond!"

Sapnap couldn't help but tense up at the winged man's comment. Ranboo could be in serious danger right at that very moment; Phil shouldn't be joking in a time like this, let alone about the hybrid running off, terrified out of his wits. Not only couldn't Sapnap understand Philza's bond with his crows, he couldn't understand Philza himself.

A few of his comments here and there, especially concerning serious matters, seemed nonchalant and humorous, without a care in the world. Phil's expressions were always accompanied by a wide grin and a laugh. Some might have called his reactions "optimistic". Sapnap called them "unnatural", and all in all, concerning.

Philza wasn't perhaps as bloodthirsty and chaos craving as many others were, but he still had something just as scary.

Indifference.

Sapnap chose not to reply or acknowledge Phil's attempt at lightening the mood, and instead focused on scouting out the landscape around them.

The mountains along this strip of their journey were barren and lifeless, with a single shrub or living thing in sight. The small group of dogs, people and birds were quite likely the largest group of living things this part of the tundra had ever seen. The ground was perfectly still and flat, only broken up by the passing sleds and the hounds that pulled them. If there had been any trace of Ranboo coming this way, it had been buried beneath the night's snowfall or whisked away by the wind, over the rocky peaks, and out of sight.

The chains of slopes around them seemed to have curved inwards, weighed down with ice and towering over them like long, clawed hands, ready to crush them beneath their sharp fingers and calloused palms. Sapnap was in awe of them, but also deeply unsettled by their threatening demeanour, and spurred his hounds onwards. The long pass they had been travelling over for hours now soon began to widen as the slopes became scarcer and scarcer, widening into a vast expanse of perfect white for as far as the eye could see.

"Sapnap!" Philza suddenly yelled from his sled. He pointed up at the sky. "Look!"

The flock of crows they had been following all this time had sped off, and were now busy circling over a single spot in the distance, like vultures over a rotting carcass. Sarnap desperately prayed that wasn't what they were attracted to.

Philza grinned at him. "I told you they knew what they were doing!"

Sarnap didn't even have the time to apologize for his scepticism, as his friend changed his course and sped off towards a frozen lake. He did the same and soon enough, twisted icebergs began to enter his view.

The frozen body of water was spotless, without a blemish in sight. Shades of blue and silvery white danced together in harmony over the surface, and the sun's rays bounced off the ice like a mirror. Sarnap didn't care about the scenery. His attention was much more preoccupied by something else. On the banks of the lake, something was poking out of the freshly fallen snow. It was long, black and white. It connected to the only uneven mound across the entire landscape, from which other, small parts were sticking out.

The fold of a cloak.

A foot.

An ear.

One of the crows landed on the top of the mound, and began to hack at the snow, before managing to uncover and tug on a lock of salt and pepper hair. Wordlessly, Sarnap leapt off his sled before it had even stopped, and rushed towards the figure. He drew in a sharp breath, then called to Philza. "It's him!"

Without wasting a second, he began to dig, soon joined by the winged man. Phil's broken wings – previously tied to his back by a strip of linen to avoid slowing down their race across the tundra – were now fully stretched out, and tried to shelter them both as they worked. The watchful eyes of the crows and the dogs stared at them in deep silence, curious.

It didn't take long for both men to finally clear Ranboo's body of all the snow that had piled up on top of him overnight. Sarnap was relieved that there wasn't much. Phil pressed two fingers to the young hybrid's neck. He withdrew them immediately. "He's frozen..."

Sapnap's stomach sank, and he rushed to check Ranboo's pulse. At first, he panicked when he couldn't feel anything, but then decided to relax and take things slowly. Finally, through the thick oilskin of his gloves, he could feel a faint heartbeat. "He's alive!"

But Philza wasn't wrong; Ranboo was frozen. The dark, black parts of his skin and hair were now lighter – a dark grey – as if all the vivid pigments of his body had faded. Even his white spots and sides looked even whiter, a ghostly colour that rivalled even the pearly snow around them. His mouth was partially open, and his eyes were closed. His limbs and muscles were stiff and barely moved when Sapnap picked him up. His face, hands, and any other bit of his body that was exposed to the snow was littered with small, snowflake-sized burns.

Sapnap found Ranboo's body surprisingly light despite his height, and held him closely. The heaviest thing was perhaps his cloak, who had to be left on the floor.

Phil picked it up and tucked it into his sled, and began to make a nest-like space to put Ranboo in. He lay blankets upon blankets down, and even took those from Sapnap's packs to add them on. "If we bring him back now, we can save his other lives," the winged man told Sapnap, fretting over the bed and making it comfortable enough.

All the while, Sapnap held on to the young enderman hybrid's body, making sure he was safe. Although he didn't ask himself to, the warmth of his body radiated to Ranboo. Even through his clothes, his fire began to work wonders rather than cause destruction, and the stiffness of Ranboo's limbs began to melt away until he was limp in the fireborn's arms.

Out of the corner of his eye, a finger twitched, and Sapnap watched in relief as Ranboo's eyes opened a crack. He didn't say anything, but tried to curl in on himself, his lips whispering a string of silent questions and pleas.

Sapnap held him tighter. A fondness that he never knew he had for the hybrid surfaced. He barely knew Ranboo. He didn't understand him. But he would move mountains for him if it meant he was safe. "It's alright buddy," he whispered. "You've been found."

Darkness was all he could see for a long, long time.

An endless, black void stretched for as far as he could see.

It was freezing, and tasted bitter. His tongue wanted to recoil and disappear down his throat, never to resurface as long as the shadows were there. His whole body was trembling. He felt like his skeleton was trying to escape, and would rip itself out of his skin at any moment. He wrapped his hands around himself, although he couldn't feel them.

He opened his mouth, and he screamed. Nothing came out. He tried again and again, every quiet cry punctuated by erratic breaths that drained his energy little by little, sinking him further and further into the floor. Was there even one? The world around him all looked the same. Everything was black. There was no ceiling, and no floor.

He couldn't do anything but shriek and hope someone would hear him. He yelled and yelled, until his throat was raw and his tears burned down his cheeks.

A pair of hands suddenly shot out of the darkness, and gripped either side of his face. Ranboo stopped screaming.

"Wake up," said Dream.

And as he always did when Dream ordered him to do something, Ranboo obeyed.

The light was blinding, and Ranboo quickly closed his eyes again. The static in his brain only kept buzzing, disturbed even more by the sudden surge of light. He waited one, two, three minutes, then tried to open them again.

This time, the world around him catered to his senses, and was a lot less harsh in welcoming him back from the coal-coloured pits of his imagination. The spruce wood hummed in approval as the walls and ceiling moved in to greet him, and the warm woollen blankets and sheets gave him a nice, soft hug. The flaming hearth roared in a jolly bout of laughter, occasionally spluttering like the old, cripple being it was, and the windows overlooked him with a shared, side-eyed curiosity. Everything was alive.

But nothing felt more alive than Ranboo himself.

I'm alive! He let out a sigh, then let it sink in. *I'm alive...* When the few memories began to flood back to him, the hybrid had never wanted to stay dead as much as he did in that moment. He wanted to be dead.

With some difficulty, he managed to sit up. His head spun uncontrollably and every single bit of his body was shot through by stiffness and unbelievable pain. He wanted to get his bearings, and tried to calm his jittery body and nerves. That was when he let out the most violent sneeze he had ever had, shaking up his insides once again. It was loud,

and he was pretty sure people as far as Kinoko Kingdom could hear him coughing and spluttering his way through the burning sensation in his lungs. Raising a weak, trembling hand, he wiped his nose, sniffing. It ran again immediately after, and after the second or third wipe, he gave up altogether.

A trembling body, a pounding headache, and a stuffy nose. Great. That was just fantastic.

He lay back down on his side, his head hitting the pillow. The blankets felt too warm and scratchy around him, but when he stuck a tentative foot out, the air around him felt frozen, and he quickly pulled it back in. His eyes were bleary, and heavy with sleep, but still tried to focus on the world around him. He was definitely not in his drafty shack.

His gaze was drawn to a small stool set up beside where he lay. On top of it, he managed to make out a glass of something brown and steaming, and a large piece of freshly baked chocolate cake on a chipped plate. It was dark and spongy in nature, with a gooey center that trickled down into a messy, velvet puddle below. Heat was still rising from it in small, delicate wisps, and even though Ranboo's nose was blocked, he still knew that it smelled like heaven on earth. His stomach screamed and for the first time in ages, Ranboo felt hungry.

"I always knew chocolate was your favourite."

At the sound of the voice, Ranboo suddenly snapped to attention. He turned his head, and came face to face with the animalistic, battle scarred face of a piglin. His tusks gleamed, sharp and polished, hiding a grin.

The hybrid froze, paralysed to the spot. Then, he did what any child would to get away from the monsters that haunted them. He hid under the covers.

It was childlike, and he felt undeniably stupid as he did so, but it was the only thing he felt he could do. He was the child, hiding away from the monster he feared so much, or perhaps he was the monster hiding from his victim. The light filtered through the covers, and Ranboo watched as a looming shadow rose over him. He hugged his knees close to his chest, trying to fold his long body in on himself and disappear entirely.

A corner of the blankets was finally lifted a little, and an eye peeped through the small hole. "Can I come in?" a gruff, yet warm voice asked him, teasing.

Ranboo didn't want to laugh, and instead turned away. He hugged himself tighter. *This is all a bad dream.*

The mattress creaked as Technoblade sat down on it, careful not to crush the curled up kid next to him. "You know," he said. "A sorry wouldn't go amiss."

Ranboo didn't reply.

"You did try to kill me after all."

He clenched his jaw, trying to push back the inevitable.

"I've got to keep the brand of 'Technoblade never dies!' alive, Ender boy!"

It was clearly a light-hearted comment, and definitely not one meant to deliberately hurt Ranboo, but it was the one that pushed him over the edge. He let out a little sob, immediately silencing himself out of guilt and fear.

The piglin had definitely heard it. As he screwed his eyes shut, Ranboo felt the covers pull back from over his head, and he no longer knew if his body was trembling from the cold, or the terror at being murdered right there and then. He didn't even have the strength to fight back, and let Techno raise him up from his curled position, and made him look at him.

Ranboo expected a harsh, hateful glare to stare back at him followed by a quick snap of his frail neck, but instead, Techno's eyes were filled with nothing but the warmest, most genuine gaze he had ever received. Or at least, the most genuine one he could remember. The realization that he still couldn't recall much was the least disturbing thing that had happened to him today.

Techno's large, calloused hand came to cup the hybrid's cheek, wiping away the few, stray tears with his thumb. "It's alright, Ranboo," he said. "You're safe. You're home."

Home. It was such a small word. Home had never been something that Ranboo had thought he had, nor one he would ever have or deserve. But as Techno's gentle touch caressed his skin, he finally believed it. He was safe. He was home. The dam broke.

In a flash, Ranboo retreated into Techno's arms. The piglin's build was as strong and as solid as a tree, or a stone statue that had remained standing and unbroken for hundreds of years. A warm and loving statue. The recent tear tracks were once more

wet, burning their paths deeper and deeper into his cheeks, but he couldn't stop. He didn't want to stop. It felt nice. Not a painful sort of "nice", like the ones he used as an anaesthetic to numb his emotions, but rather sobs that could run freely with no fear of reprimands or harsh words.

His stuffy nostrils continued to run, as did the tears and before long, a small, wet spot had formed on Techno's shoulder.

But the piglin made no move to push him off. On the contrary, he held the hybrid tightly, with his snotty nose, bulging, red-rimmed eyes and everything in between. Ranboo knew he was being treated like a kid, curled up in his guardian's lap and bawling his eyes out, yet Techno didn't seem to mind. At all. Being young had never felt so real and good, yet so tragic to Ranboo.

"I-I'm sorry," the hybrid finally gasped, finding his voice and clenching onto Techno's shirt. "I'm sorry for everything I did..."

"It's alright Ranboo. It's alright."

He didn't deserve Techno's forgiveness, or any forgiveness whatsoever. That single sentence was too little, yet meant so much.

"Now." Technoblade's tone had turned a lot more jolly now, and again, he made Ranboo look at him. The hybrid knew he was a sick, disgusting mess, but Techno said nothing about any of it. "You're going to wipe those tears, and eat that cake. I made it especially for you, and it's getting cold. Can you do that for me?"

With a sniffle, Ranboo nodded. The piglin smiled at him, and the hybrid forced himself to grin back. "Okay."

"Good kid," the other chuckled, handing him a handkerchief to blow his nose and tidy himself up a little.

For a while after, all there was was silence, save for the gentle crackling of the fire and the scraping of Ranboo's fork against the plate. The cake would have been delicious if Ranboo hadn't contracted the worst cold of his entire life. It was flavourless, and the texture was a little lumpy, but he still wolfed it down nonetheless, his belly begging him for nourishment. Not only that, Techno went out of his way to make him something nice to eat, and not the usual, overused meal of bland chicken soup that was said to heal any ailment. He washed down the rest with the glass of brown liquid, which ended up being hot chocolate fresh from the steaming pot resting above the hearth.

As he drank, Ranboo took a better look at his surroundings. He was in the downstairs part of Techno's cabin, settled comfortably on a makeshift cot in the corner. His cloak, dripping wet from the melted frost, hung over a chair, droplets of water hammering against the floorboards. All the gold that had once layered the floor had been stored away. It was all so familiar. Even Techno's large, broad figure watching him with great interest was nostalgic in a way he couldn't understand. It was as if he was seeing him for the first time, and when Ranboo had finished his meal, Techno wordlessly cleared it away for him.

The hybrid lay back down in his bed, suddenly taking note of how exhausted he really was. He lazily watched Technoblade clean out the cutlery and glass in the wash basin, and saw the large, bleeding bandage wrapped around his forearm.

He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to stay quiet about it. The subject of the attack itself hadn't been brought up, and clearly that was for the best. They both clearly wanted to move on from it, but that didn't stop Ranboo's stomach from sinking at the mere, vivid memory.

"If there's anything else I can do for you, just say so," Techno said after decades of silence.

Ranboo hesitated. He was safe, fed, warm and forgiven. He didn't need anything else. But he *could* do something for Techno. "Could you read me *The Art Of War*?" he asked.

"The Art of War" by Sun Tzu was one of Techno's many obsessions. It wasn't exactly anything that extraordinary – just a philosophical book on the art of strategising and fighting – but it meant the world to the piglin. He would quote it on the regular, and he would base his whole warrior persona around its teachings. Whenever a ship would come back from the Old World, laden with books and artefacts, it was almost certain that Techno would manage to smuggle off one or two copies of it. An entire shelf of his bookcase was dedicated to that one book, with different editions in so many languages that Ranboo was sure even Techno himself didn't understand. Ranboo was honestly a little sick of it constantly being mentioned, as well as his mentor's constant suggestions that he should read it.

But today, as he uttered the request, Techno looked stunned. Once the initial shock settled in, he gave the hybrid a small, composed smile, although Ranboo could tell that he was trying his hardest to contain his bubbling excitement. "Of course I can," he replied, and went to get it.

He picked a random copy of it from his collection, and put on his reading glasses. Still in a somewhat childish mindset, Ranboo realized how funny it truly was that a perfect, unbeatable warrior like Techno could have a problem with his eyesight. That made him smile a little. Techno sat back down on the edge of Ranboo's bed with a groan, making himself comfortable. The bed creaked. The copy of "The Art Of War" he held was one of the many he had that was written with strange, foreign symbols made up of a myriad of lines each. And there were many, many characters, each of them different. It looked unnecessarily complicated, and Ranboo knew for a fact that Technoblade didn't understand a single line of it. That said, he already knew the book by heart, and probably only picked up a physical copy of it for effect. It was unnecessary, but it was a sweet gesture nonetheless. "Thank you, Techno," Ranboo said.

The piglin looked over at him, then ruffled his hair. "You're welcome, Ranboo."

He opened his mouth to start reading – or reciting, or whatever – when something tapped gently against the window. The piglin and the hybrid turned to see what the fuss was about. An obsidian black crow hopped back and forth on the windowsill, impatient to get in. In its beak, it held a pristine white envelope.

"I wish we had another kind of postal service," Techno grumbled, reading Ranboo's thoughts as he snapped open the window. "And not Phil's chatty flock." Techno grabbed the letter from the crow, who politely stayed outside, and sliced it open with the tip of one of his tusks. He pried the paper out from inside, and unfolded it. He began to read.

Ranboo watched on, intrigued, as Techno's expression changed. From the excited warrior who was eager to read the great teachings of Master Sun Tzu to his student, he had turned into a stone cold piglin, his eyes skimming the contents of the message. The change was radical, and sudden. Ranboo couldn't help himself. "What does it say?" There was silence for another minute or so as Techno finished the letter, before he folded it up and put it back in its envelope. His expression was one of deep confusion, and perhaps a hint of something else Ranboo couldn't see that well. It wasn't fear. It couldn't be fear. This was Technoblade. The hybrid asked again. "Techno?"

"I'm needed at Pandora's Vault," he said, standing up and reaching for his cloak. "The Art Of War" was all but abandoned on top of Ranboo's knees, as were any more chances of them both bonding that day. "Sam wants to see me."

Chapter Thirty-Four: The First Visit

Technoblade,

Your presence is requested at Pandora's Vault, as soon as possible. I understand that it may sound strange and sudden, but I promise you that there is a good reason for it.

The Warden

That was it. That was all the letter said. To an outsider like Ranboo, the time Techno took to read it definitely made it seem like it was longer. But in fact, the piglin had re-read it over and over again, making sure he had understood it correctly. His reactions, however, had been genuine. To say he was puzzled would be an understatement. He was, in fact, thoroughly confused, and a little suspicious.

No one aside from the Syndicate members had directly contacted him for the past year or so, unless it was to send him laughable death threats about Doomsday and the destruction of L'Manberg on multiple occasions. He had in fact also received a considerable amount of long, convoluted letters from Tommy, jam-packed with graphic descriptions about the different ways he'd skin the piglin alive. Techno kept those precious ones apart from the rest, as they certainly offered a good, light-hearted read when he was in the mood for them.

Now, not only was the one contacting him treating him with respect, but the sender was also the Warden of Pandora's Vault. The Vault was the most terrifying and secure facility Techno had ever seen, and currently holding the only man that could beat the piglin in combat. Technoblade couldn't deny that he would probably fit right at home inside, and pay for his crimes. Well, *crimes*. What other people considered crimes, and that he himself simply called necessary courses of action. Each to their own.

Techno could have easily just ignored the letter, but not before shooting the feathered messenger that had brought it over. Every bit of evidence relating to its arrival could easily be covered up. He could have got on with his day, and forgotten all about Sam's request. But he was curious. Suspicious, yes, but also deeply intrigued at why he was asked to show up on the mainland, and with such urgency. Anyway, he couldn't get away with wringing the neck of one of Phil's crows and not feel his friend's wrath, so going to the Vault seemed almost preferable.

The piglin didn't want to leave Ranboo alone, especially not after his frozen body had only just come back to life. It didn't seem like Ranboo wanted to be left alone: Technoblade wasn't dumb, he knew that the hybrid had no interest in the ancient teachings "The Art Of War" had to offer. He just wanted Techno to stay with him, to have some greatly needed company and affection.

That was why, when he left his cabin, he asked Philza and Sapnap to keep an eye on the young one for him, quickly reassuring them that the kid was perfectly fine – albeit a little sick – when their questions undoubtedly surfaced. They didn't ask him where he was going, and he had no intention of telling them anything either. It wasn't that he didn't trust them, far from it. He just didn't want them to worry about him. Ranboo needed all the fussing over, not the fabled warrior who could crush an entire battalion without breaking a sweat. He'd be fine.

So he saddled up Carl, and rode to Pandora's Vault. Technoblade kept his head low and covered by the hood of a simple black cloak throughout his journey and thankfully, no one stopped him on his way.

Techno may have been immune to the faceless threats cast his way, but he strongly preferred not to draw attention to himself and test the wrath and patience of the people. It wasn't cowardly; it was smart. Technoblade was a smart warrior. He knew what he was doing, he always did. He was cunning, he was strategic, and he always made the right decisions. At least, he used to. He still had no idea why he was going to the prison in the first place.

All the while, the voices in his head continued to clamour, demanding him to slit the throat of every passer-by and bathe in their blood. They always did. Technoblade, remarkably, managed to resist.

The first first voice he had heard was when he was very young. When he was barely nine, he had taken the final life of an armed bandit while fighting for his own. The moment the body had stopped writhing and breathing altogether – the sharp stick Techno had stabbed him with still poking out from the bandit's chest – a loud shriek had filled his ears. That scream had soon turned into a cackle, and finally a voice. It was raspy, and it was loud.

The first voice was mean. It would always throw insults Techno's way, no matter the time of day or the situation. Sometimes, the piglin cried, and the voice mocked him. But little Technoblade – so alone, so afraid – only had the single voice for company, and so he tried to get used to it.

As the years dragged on, Technoblade got older. He got stronger. His heart hardened, and his remorse was pushed aside. His body count rose steadily, and with it, the number of voices in his head. That first, vicious bandit had been drowned out by a myriad of others. At first, they all insulted him and cursed him for taking their final lives, but as they realized that Techno's battle prowess was unmatched, their hate soon turned into awe.

"God" is what they called him for about a month, encouraging new voices to call him the same. Eventually, it was changed to "Blood God", and that name had stuck ever since. With that awe came a thirst for action and blood. "Blood for the Blood God!" they shrieked, hungry for violence. Technoblade used to listen to them all the time, bowing to their wishes and burning down entire villages if he was pushed to.

But when he first met Philza, he started to control himself. Phil was kind to Techno, and Techno to him. The voices, at first, were outraged by his compassion and lack of sparring, but soon came to accept, and eventually worship Phil in the same way they did Techno. They even gave him a nickname: the Angel of Death.

Whether Philza knew of it or not, Techno still didn't know.

Sadly, as with every bad habit, Techno caved in once he was travelling alone again. He began to listen and please the voices once more, when he and Phil had parted ways. They were restless. It would only be years later, when Philza would set foot on the land of the SMP that the piglin went back to contradicting them.

The voices compromised. They started to become a lot more tame and hushed, for which Techno was thankful. Of course, they would return to their usual uproar in the heat of battle, but that was expected. There is only so much of an animal's instinct that can be controlled. When Phil came back, the voices loved him as much as ever, and soon, loved Ranboo too.

The voices were what made Technoblade forgive Ranboo so easily. They were very persuasive – and, dare he say, incredibly biased, yet so was he. The piglin and the souls in his head fit like hand in glove, and unfortunately, nothing was going to change that.

Finally, Technoblade reached the coastline, and the building that sat along it. Pandora's Vault could be seen from insanely far away, even from the frozen beaches of the Antarctic Commune, and he had glimpses of it during its building stage. But when seeing the completed build from up close for the first time, he finally felt its power. He and Carl were merely specks against its cold, black walls, and for the first time for as long as he could remember, Techno felt vulnerable.

Sam greeted him at the entrance. After a quick handshake, he led the piglin inside. Carl was graciously allowed to cross beyond the portals, although Techno had to leave him in the lobby. Afterwards, the entry contracts were signed, and Technoblade was made to put his sword, extra daggers, cloak and other unessential items in one of the visitor lockers. With nothing but the clothes on his back and his bandaged wound, Techno was escorted into the belly of the beast.

Throughout the security checks, Technoblade took the opportunity to look around. The interior of the Vault was much less impressive than the piglin had expected. From the outside, he had pictured insanely high ceilings, decorated hallways with rows upon rows of armoured, unsmiling guards standing to attention for hours on end along with large, blackstone statues of vile, horrifying creatures from ancient mythology that acted as an extra line of silent watchers, keeping an eye on the chaotic force held within the walls.

But instead, all the inside seemed to be was an array of small and narrow corridors. The largest rooms were barely a head higher than himself, and the most visually impressive thing Techno had managed to pick out was the huge, vault door that hid the rows of rudimentary cells. It honestly felt a little cramped, and as they progressed, it felt lifeless. All these guards he had pictured simply weren't there; the only form of defence this Vault seemed to have was the Warden himself and the redstone traps and security systems he made.

It was dark, it was simultaneously unbearably hot and freezing cold, and it was dead. The entire building just felt *dead*. It was nothing like the other prisons and dungeons of Techno's own acquaintance. Yet Sam wasn't like the other jailers he had met either. For one, he didn't handcuff him and attempt to shove him into the smallest cell known to man, or threaten him with any of his possessions if he didn't comply.

Of course, there was that line in the entry contract that stated that if Techno was to mess with anything that could lead the prisoners to escaping, the Warden was allowed to hunt him down and kill him on sight, but those were just insignificant details in the piglin's eyes. It wasn't like Techno cared about his own mortality anyway.

Blood for the Blood God.

Techno did have to admit, he could tell that Sam was paranoid and constantly on edge. Every security measure was executed thoroughly, and sometimes more than once. The piglin was even certain that some of these random stops to check his empty pockets weren't even in the original line-up.

Was it because Technoblade was Technoblade? Surely, Sam knew by now that he didn't need any weapons to take down an enemy. His raw, brute strength was unmatched, and could be enough to knock a fully armoured warrior out cold in a matter of minutes.

Eventually, after a period of time that seemed to drag on for hours, Techno was faced with a wall of steaming lava. Sam activated a lever on one of the walls, and the gears over their heads began to churn. The warden then took a stance beside the visitor, staring straight ahead into the orange void. Techno did too, for a while, before getting bored and started casting furtive glances to the side. Sam hadn't uttered a single word since they walked through the entrance, and neither had the piglin. Everything that had taken place had been done in mutual understanding or with silent gestures. Sam still hadn't told him why he was here, although he had a good idea based on the context clues.

Technoblade was getting sick of the silence. That said, he was also very attached to his freedom, and the cells they had passed didn't look like the cosiest places in the world. His first word was tentative. "So..." He trailed off, expecting the warden's trident to come and cut into his windpipe as he threatened him to stay quiet, but nothing happened.

Sam's eyes briefly glanced at the visitor, but he still said nothing. He was cold and stoic, but not unreadable. He was still somewhat nervous. Techno remembered when he used to be talkative and upbeat. Where did all that go?

Technoblade decided to press further. "We haven't talked in a while."

A while was an understatement, and they both seemed to know it. "If we're talking accurately, I'd say it's been years." Sam's voice was slightly muffled by the mask over his face.

That was the most Technoblade had heard Sam say since he had come to the SMP. Of course, as with everyone else, they had met on the battlefield – usually on opposing sides – but had never crossed blades. It was likely unintentional, but Techno was somewhat glad they hadn't. He would have felt bad if he had to take a life or two from the warden. "Years? Already? Time flies." Techno forced himself to chuckle. "So it's been a long time, eh?"

"A long time, yes." A small crinkle in the corner of Sam's eye told Techno that he too was forcing himself to strike up a conversation, and lighten the mood.

"Do you usually talk to your visitors like this?" he asked.

"No, but you've been very obedient so far. I can let it slide."

Not like the extensive security measures, Techno thought. "That's good. That's great..."

Another silence fell between them, this time awkward rather than tense. The piglin desperately looked around for a topic of conversation they could explore. Then he remembered he was in the biggest one he could ever help to find. "The redstone training paid off, didn't it?" He gestured to the Vault around them.

"Hm? Oh, yes... I guess it did." The warden's mind and attention span seemed to be oceans away, and his reply was short and nonchalant. It wasn't modesty; it was indifference. Either he had received that same comment too many a time, or he was still too preoccupied to answer genuinely. Technoblade had a feeling it was a bit of both.

"You're nervous about something," Techno noted.

Immediately, Sam turned to him. "I'm not," he snapped back.

Technoblade smiled. He had definitely touched a sensitive spot. It didn't surprise him; contesting and unsettling authority was his speciality after all. He remained much more composed than the warden was. "Easy there, I'm not going to do anything, I swear."

"I'm not worried about what you'll do," Sam suddenly admitted to him. "I'm worried about what Dream will do."

"So we *are* going to see him."

"I thought it was obvious."

"Well..." Technoblade made a face, and cocked an eyebrow. "You didn't exactly tell me anything."

From the sag in Sam's stance, the piglin could tell he had relaxed a little. "Did I need to?"

"A bit of information would have helped, yes."

"Tough then."

"Alrighty." Technoblade paused. A little voice nagged at him from the back of his mind – quite likely belonging to one of the many orphans he had "accidentally" slaughtered during his frenzies, if he had to guess – and a realization seeped in. "I won't let Dream kill me like he did Tommy."

"Shut up, and keep your eyes forward." The warden's tone was cold and threatening, and although Techno could have easily overpowered him right there and then, he said nothing. He decided to obey, and keep up the act of the good little visitor Sam had praised him for. Clearly, Tommy's death was still a sensitive topic in this region. *Why don't you all just move on?*

He ignored the mocking laughter of the voices who saw right through his indifference and annoyance. He hated how they could do so accurately, and he hated how their jeers would manage to get to him and unearth truths he would much rather ignore.

Finally, the lava curtain had dispersed, and Techno stared. Out in a black box suspended over a lake of burning magma, Dream stood to attention. He was expecting him, and for the first time that day, Technoblade was truly unsettled.

"I'm going to send you over," Sam said from somewhere behind him.

Wordlessly, Techno nodded, and the floor beneath his feet began to jerk forwards. The pit of lava below was nothing more than a death trap, and Techno made sure not to trip and fall. With his feet planted firmly against the bridge, he kept his eyes forward. With every jerk of the bridge, Dream grew closer and closer, and his smile wider and wider. Gods above, Technoblade didn't like that smile.

"Technoblade!" the prisoner cried as Techno set foot on the floor of the holding cell. The piglin opened his mouth to reply, when he was suddenly whisked into a tight hug. Well, as tight as a hug could be when Dream's arms couldn't wrap all the way around him. "I'm so glad you came!"

"Dream!" came a shout from the other side of the chasm. "Leave him alone!"

"Lighten up, Sam!" Dream replied, rolling his eyes. "I'm saying hello to a friend!"

"I... errr..." The piglin looked around them, confused. "I'm assuming that this isn't a trap then..."

"A trap? What do you mean?"

"You never know." Techno was suspicious, as usual. Again, he wasn't exactly liked in any way, so a plan to lure him into Pandora's Vault and never have him leave was one of the first that had entered his mind. But since that didn't seem to be the case, he sighed in relief. "I smuggled this in just in case." He reached under the folds of his bandage, and removed a small knife – which he had honestly forgotten about up until then – about the size of this thumb. He held it up and twirled it between his fingers.

"TECHNO!" the two others yelled in unison. Dream's cry was in wide-eyed awe and even amusement, his eyes glued to the shining weapon.

Sam's was in horror and betrayal. "TECHNO, DROP THAT IMMEDIATELY!" he yelled, readying his trident from the other side of the chasm.

Technoblade turned around to face him. "Alright, alright! I'm sorry!" He threw it down into the lava below, and the warden lay down his weapon.

"Do you have any more that I don't know of?"

"Nope."

The piglin watched as he walked off, grumbling something, and pulled down the lava divide again. It was much quicker to fall as it was to drain and before long, he was cut off from the rest of the world, alone with Dream.

Behind him, the prisoner started laughing. "Don't worry about him, he's not really mad at you," he said. "He's beating himself up for not checking you thoroughly."

A tiny puddle of guilt began to form in his stomach, and Techno shrugged. "Eh, Sam's too well-meaning to decide to pat a bleeding wound. He's a decent guy." More than decent, in Techno's eyes, but he wasn't about to tell Dream any bit of that story.

Dream cocked his head. "Some might say empathy is a weakness of his."

"It would be considered a strength, depending on how you look at it." The piglin shook his head to attempt to clear his thoughts. Not that the voices would budge any time soon, but it was still worth a shot. "I know we're not here to discuss your warden, Dream."

Techno still had no idea why he was here, but from the way Dream seemed to be expecting him and ready to welcome him with open arms, it was at his request. He had so many questions, but didn't have the chance to ask any of them.

"Tell me," Dream asked him. "Have you smuggled anything else past the warden?"

Techno frowned, not liking the glint in the criminal's eyes. "Not smuggled exactly," he said. "I have a blunt knife made by Ranboo in the sole of my boot from when I tried to teach him metalwork. It can't hurt a fly, but still looks threatening from afar." He also kept it as a little memento from a nice, chill moment they had together, but he wasn't about to soften in front of Dream.

The prisoner laughed. "Ranboo's a sweet kid," he sighed. "How is he?"

Techno bristled. "He's fine," he said, narrowing his eyes. "And that's all you need to know."

"And that's all I want to know."

It might have come as a surprise to some, but Techno didn't necessarily like Dream. Sure, they had fought together multiple times, including on Doomsday where their mutual support was crucial, but that didn't exactly mean they were close in any way, or friendly beyond their own understanding. "Why am I here, Dream?" Techno asked him.

The prisoner shrugged. "I just wanted to see you," he said. Technoblade couldn't exactly tell if that was a lie or not, but if Dream's only plan was to inconvenience him when he would have much rather stayed home and looked after Ranboo, then he had succeeded.

The piglin snorted. "Well, in that case... You've seen me." He was about to call for Sam, when Dream stopped him.

He stood in front of Techno, arms crossed and smiling. "Tell me about the outside."

The piglin hesitated. "The outside?"

"Yes."

"Well... The grass is green, the sky is blue, the snow is white..." *This is stupid.* "It hasn't changed."

"It still sounds wonderful." The piglin couldn't tell if the prisoner was making fun of him or not. "I'm assuming that you like to ride Carl through the tundra, don't you?"

That question was random to say the least. But Techno knew Dream, and nothing he ever did or said was random. His guard immediately skyrocketed. "Sometimes," he replied, defensive.

"Is he well?"

Now the conversation was turning way too suspicious, and Techno wanted to back out when he could. But the voices urged him on. "He's fine."

"Good, good." He paused. "Because it would be a shame if, say, something else happened to him."

Something else. Techno knew exactly what Dream was referring to, and his mind started to clear up again. It did, but he definitely didn't want it to. "What?"

Dream sighed. "Well... Let's imagine that Quackity comes after you again, this time with the power of Las Nevadas behind him." He shrugged. "He knows what to do now, and where he went wrong. He won't make the same mistakes again, and he'd be damned before he'd let you shove another pickaxe through his face."

The Butcher Army.

The execution.

Of course. Techno still held those memories fresh in his mind. The satisfying crunch of Quackity's skull against the edge of that pick rang in his ears, and the stench of blood that painted the underground passageway afterwards filled his nostrils once again.

"I've even heard that Las Nevadas has a restaurant called 'The Butcher's Axe' with your face on it. That's pretty interesting to know, right?"

Technoblade would not let himself get gaslighted or manipulated in any way by the grinning prisoner who was clearly trying to do so. "What are you getting at?"

"Woah, easy there," Dream chuckled, holding up his hands. "I'm just reminding you that without me, both you and Carl wouldn't be here today. Alive, at least."

The piglin raised his eyebrows, and automatically glanced behind him. The lava wall was loud and bubbling. Sam wouldn't hear anything, not that there was going to be anything to hear... right? Technoblade was hoping not. But he couldn't stay in the dark either. "What do you want, Dream?" he asked him.

Dream's grin was sinister. "I think you know, Blade."

"He wants to put in a food complaint."

"What?"

This entire situation was dumb, and Techno felt like an idiot talking to Sam in that moment, but he carried on. "He wants better food."

Sam looked surprised to say the least. "So, he wanted you to come simply to beg me for more favours?"

Techno didn't know what he meant by "more favours", but he shrugged. "I don't know, that's just what he asked me to tell you."

"Did he ask for anything in particular?"

"He's fine with the potatoes," Techno said. "He's admitted that he likes the freedom of cooking them however he wants."

The warden nodded slowly. "I guess that's... good? Then why is he complaining?"

"He says they taste funny, like someone soaked them in potions or something." The piglin shook his head. "I don't know exactly."

"Well..." Sam, quite honestly, looked a little shaken up. There was a moment of silence as he thought about it. Techno waited patiently for his response, before interjecting with his own. "I could question Snowchester about their methods, but I don't think—"

The piglin scoffed. "Sam, let's not lie to ourselves here: Snowchester is doing what nations do best, which is capitalize and favour quantity over quality. Who knows what they spray on their crops to make them grow, especially so far North?" He was only theorizing about the pesticide problem that may or may not be happening in Snowchester, but Sam seemed to be buying it.

"I guess we could get the food from somewhere else," the warden said, again deep in thought. "But there isn't anywhere else that specializes in that sort of agriculture."

"That's what you think." This was Technoblade's moment, and he wasn't going to let it slide. "I can sell some to you."

Sam perked up, suddenly alert, and interested. "I'm listening."

"Well, I didn't spend over twelve hours a day for months farming five hundred million potatoes for nothing now," the piglin said, puffing up his chest proudly. "I've earned my title as the Potato King, I'd say."

To say Sam looked shocked would be an understatement. He was terrified. "Who... Who has that much time on their hands...?"

Well, Technoblade did, a few years ago. He had tried to settle down once before, attempting to retire from his violent ways, only to start up a quaint little farm and immediately get competitive with his neighbour next door. The Great Potato War, as the townsfolk had called it, had dragged on for ages and ages, with Techno eventually coming out as the victor. It required an iron-clad will, determination, a shockingly impressive amount of body strength, and time, but he managed. The voices were strangely enthralled by it all. The only exaggeration Techno gave in his small rendition of the story to the warden was the title itself. It sounded prestigious, yes, but all it really entailed was a small party in the town square and a crown made from potato spuds and flowers. He left the farming life soon after and began his reign of terror once again, but not before spending a good week outside his disgraced rival's farmland to gloat and jeer.

Technoblade shrugged. "What can I say? They say you have to go big or go home, and I went big." The warden still looked stunned, so he continued. "We at the Antarctic Commune grow our spuds fresh and with no chemical input. They are the finest of potatoes, I can promise you that."

"Well, I wouldn't say that Dream needs the best—"

"I'll sell them to you for a cheaper price than Snowchester does."

"Done."

Strangely enough, it was easy to get Sam to agree to his suggestion, and Techno gave himself a pat on the back. They were back in the prison's lobby, and the piglin went to reclaim his possessions from the locker.

"So let me get this straight," Sam asked him as he strapped his belt back on. "Dream only wanted to see you to close a business deal."

Techno hesitated for a moment, his fingers hovering over his buckle. "You could say that," he finally agreed, tightening it. He then draped his cloak over his shoulders. He came out of the locker room to come face to face with Sam, who was holding Carl by his reins and waiting for him. He handed the piglin his horse, who whinnied gently when Techno gave him a pat. "Thank you."

"I hate to say this, but I don't want to see you near the prison again."

"Heh? How come?"

"That knife stunt back in the holding cell? Smuggling a weapon past security? Does that ring a bell?"

"Oh right." Techno should have seen that coming.

Sam continued. "It's nothing against you, Techno, honestly. It's just how it works here."

The piglin made a face, which Sam clearly did not appreciate. "Might want to think about loosening the protocols a bit," he suggested. "It seems like they're doing more harm than good."

If looks could kill, Technoblade would have lost his signature motto in a heartbeat. "My prison, my rules," Sam replied sternly.

"Right, yes. Gotta love authority." He turned to leave. "I'll send you a delivery at some point. We've got a few sacks ready." Suddenly, he was jerked back, and almost lost his balance. Carl's reigns slipped out of his hands, and the animal reared up before taking a few frightened steps back. Technoblade was about to draw his sword, when he saw where Sam had grabbed him.

The leather strap of his necklace cut against his skin, and the emerald gem was glinting in the palm of Sam's hand. The warden's eyes were wide, and he turned the stone over and over in his palm. "Techno..."

"Get off!" Suddenly defensive, the piglin yanked the pendant out of his grasp, and held it close to his chest. "What's wrong with you?"

"Look at it."

Technoblade reluctantly did, if only to get Sam off his back, when he froze. The vibrant green of the emerald was slowly being drained, and replaced by a shining, ruby

red. It even sparkled like one now, and Techno narrowed his eyes. "What..." he breathed, confused and concerned. He turned it over and over in his hand. "How...?"

"Techno, this is serious." Sam's voice was tense and hushed, and just as worried as Techno himself, perhaps even more so.

"What's going on?" He dropped the pendant, letting it bounce against his chest.

The warden gently touched his shoulder. "Have you been exposed to the Egg recently?"

It was such a specific question, and Techno was close to admitting the truth. But then, that would prompt even more questions, and an explanation regarding Ranboo's situation, which wasn't Techno's to share. So he stayed cautious and vague. "I don't know."

"Have you been hearing any voices?"

"Not aside from the ordinary ones, no." He wouldn't explain that either, but luckily the warden was too preoccupied to question him on that.

Sam pointed at the wound on his arm. "Is that wound healing properly?"

"What are you, my doctor?" Techno shook him off. "Listen, I don't know what's going on."

"You need to take that necklace off as soon as possible, Technoblade. Trust me."

Technoblade automatically grabbed at it, and held it as close as he could to his body. The rough, uneven edges of the emerald cut deeply into his palm, but he didn't care. "No. I won't." He looked down at it fondly – despite his personal promise to not be sentimental in front of others. "Philza gave me this. I can't take it off." He hadn't, for years and years. It had stayed hanging around his neck; a symbol of the strongest friendship Technoblade had ever formed, and one that would survive until the end of his life and beyond.

But all the frustration Sam had apparently kept locked inside of him all this time suddenly boiled over, and he yelled. "I don't give a *damn* about Philza," he spat, ripping the gas-mask off his face. Now, Techno could see him fully, and his expression was blazing. "But I do give a damn about *your* life, Techno! Take it off, and lock it away!"

The Vault's authority was giving him orders, and Technoblade did not like it one bit. "No." He turned away, retrieved Carl, and headed for the Nether portal. "I'm sick of people telling me what to do with my attachments." Subconsciously, he gripped Carl's reigns tighter.

"I'm trying to help you." Sam said.

"Then stop. And be careful with what you say about my friends. It may come to bite you in the—"

"Good day, Technoblade." Sam's tone had softened, and had morphed from the frantic, spiteful anger to tired and disappointed.

The piglin couldn't fault him for trying to help, although his comment about Phil rubbed him the wrong way. Nevertheless, he also replied calmly. "Good day."

With that, Technoblade left. He decided to walk most of the way, across the Badlands to the nearest Nether portal he could find and that would take him close to home. Keeping his head low simultaneously from the normal passers-by and the infected population with the blood red eyes, he took the time to think, and listen to the voices. At first, it had seemed like a bad idea, as all of them were pushing him to burn down a house or two, but he soon realized that they were not the only whispers in his mind.

Soft hisses, similar to snakes, wormed their way in between the web of bloodthirsty souls, then settled down and began to chant. Their song was strange, incomprehensible, and made a chill run up his spine. He looked up, and gaped as the red vines arched over him like clawed hands, ready to pluck him up like a mere speck of dust and strangle him in their grasp. Even Carl tiptoed nervously, pressing against his master for comfort, or maybe he could sense the piglin's uneasiness, and was trying to give him some reassurance of his own. Who was to say?

Techno reached for his pendant. The emerald had almost completely turned into a ruby, drowning out the green like a pool of blood seeping out onto the vibrant grass of a battlefield. He stared at it for a few seconds, then tore the necklace off from around his neck.

The intruders in his head were suddenly silenced, and he was left with the usual, comforting screams out for blood. He breathed a sigh of relief, and pocketed the emerald. He would try and figure out how to turn it back at a later date, with Sapnap or

Ranboo. Not with Phil. Techno had a feeling that his friend wasn't as immune to the Egg as he pretended to be.

And, gods above, Techno would rather die before he owed another deranged force a favour, all because he was too protective over what he loved.

Chapter Thirty-Five: What Was Loved, What Was Lost

Every tale has its beginning, and the Captain's story was no different. She would have probably told people everything, if she wasn't scared of judgement, that is. But if she *could* share it, she would probably tell it as follows.

Once upon a time, there was a town. There was nothing remarkable about this town, except perhaps it's location, next to the sea. It was small, and it was quaint, but it was a lovely place. It had a clean, animated town square, winding cobbled streets and a large port down in the bay. The townsfolk relied on the sea for their well-being, striving for and collecting the treasures it brought. Fish, salt or the occasional bounty from far away lands made up most of their wealth.

The Captain was born and raised in this coastal town, between the cries of the gulls in the sky and the lapping of the waves against the jagged rocks below. Her mother gushed to anyone who would listen that the moment her daughter opened her eyes, she saw the entire ocean within them. She knew her little lamb would travel far from home, sailing over the seas with nothing but the legends of old and the starry night sky as her guide. But the Captain was young back then, and didn't pay much attention to her mother's foreshadowing. She instead concentrated on growing up. That was the most important thing, after all.

Growing up while you could.

Her family was loving, and she wouldn't change them for the world. Her father was a well-respected advisor to the mayor, and her mother was a sailor, who then passed on her love of the sea to her children and, when they asked her for them, the skills to tame it. The Captain soon knew how to steer a boat before she could even read.

The Captain loved her mother more than she could possibly say. There was a bond between them she had never felt with anyone else, a bond that was only strengthened

by the long stories of pirates and buried treasure that her mother would tell her late into the night. The Captain promised that one day, she would be like her, in every way possible.

As she grew, so did her love for the bitter taste of the ocean, and so did her possibilities to do something about it. She spent every single moment she could down on the coast, charming and teasing the hearts of the sailors, town rascallions and mermaids alike as she set out on frequent fishing trips or helped patch up holes in the hulls of ships. Anything she could do, she did, and many were proud of her for that.

The town wasn't as big as some liked to make it out to be, and it was only a matter of time before she met every single soul in it, including the Ram. The first time she met him, her father had invited him around to their house for dinner. "He's the new member of the council," her father had said, as pleased as punch. "He's a very talented young one."

And talented he was. Talented, charismatic, and witty. The Captain's family was enchanted, and so was she. He was soon a frequent guest in their home, and she couldn't have been happier about it. Yet, they had never said two words to each other.

Most of his interactions with her family were with her father – with whom he discussed business matters – and her mother, to whom he gave compliments about her cooking and hospitality. He was also not above openly flirting with a couple of her older brothers and sisters. The Captain felt a little excluded, and she didn't know why it made her feel queasy.

It took the Ram a month to ask her for her name, and another month after that to finally invite her out for a drink.

That entire night had changed everything and for the first time, the Captain knew what it was like to be in love. She had searched for it relentlessly like a sparkling treasure chest, in sailors and the merpeople in the lagoons, and so far with nothing back but a gentle laugh and a small kiss on the cheek. But no one and nothing made her feel more giddy and excited like the Ram – *her* Ram – did, and his amount of affection for her even rivalled that of her own family. Every moment they spent together was magical, and she wanted everything to stay like that. Forever.

The Ram was even more charming and caring when he was with her, and never missed an opportunity to make her feel loved and safe. He even promised to marry her one day, and that was the single, most wonderful sentence anyone had ever said to her.

He was perfect, until he wasn't.

One night had changed everything. The church, the bank and the mayor's office were broken into. All the valuables were stolen, and crooks and thieves were running wild as they escaped capture. The Captain wasn't sure what exactly happened, and the Ram was never clear with his version of events when she asked him. He was somehow mixed up in the whole situation, as one of the robbers or else, and turned up at her home to seek shelter.

Her father opened the door, but instead of letting the Ram in graciously as he had so many times before, he locked him out, and told him never to come back again. The Captain was terrified for him, and snook out to meet him where they always did at night; a small smuggler's cavern down along the coastline. There, the Ram told her he had to leave that very same night, under the cover of darkness, and he wanted her to come with him.

The Captain was torn; on one hand, her family and everything she stood for was in her home town, and on the other, her lover and a whole world of adventure awaited her beyond the fishing grounds. The legends were all out there, and she desperately wanted to be a part of them. Perhaps she should have thought more about her decision, and taken time to prepare, but barely an hour later, they both loaded up a small sailing boat with whatever they needed, and left. The moment the Captain lost sight of her home, she knew she was never coming back.

They travelled for a week or two, until they came to another realm. They finally docked, and began to build a life together.

The Captain was a bright and strong sailor, and soon found herself a job down in the harbour, among the merchants and the largest galleons she had ever seen in her life. The Ram found his own vocation in multiple administrative matters, and became an eloquent speaker who was soon favoured to be the next mayor. He was flattered by all the attention, and his confidence only grew.

They bought a small, cosy cottage in the middle of the town. It was a little run-down and was falling apart in some places, but they made it work with bright smiles on their faces and their heads light with hopeful dreams of their future together. As two strangers in a far away land, they could only count on each other for a long time. They entered the next stage of their lives together, and their love only grew.

Soon enough, the inevitable happened, and they welcomed a new addition into their small, happy family: baby boy with messy brown hair and polished black hooves

just like his father and wide, curious crystal eyes coupled with the gentle touch of his mother.

The Captain never knew how she would be able to share the love she felt for the Ram with someone else until she cradled her baby in her arms for the first time. He was as light as a feather, and cried with the force of a raging storm captured in a glass bottle, corked up inside this small, feeble soul she held on to. She couldn't believe that so much life could be held in such a small thing, and that so much adoration could be held inside of herself.

For a few, blissful months, she had the perfect life she had always dreamed of. A life with the ships, a loving partner, and a child of her own.

It was perfect, until it wasn't.

The Ram was good at hiding it, at first. He went to work, came home, played with his baby son and spent time with his lover, then they ate, and went to sleep. One day, he came home late, although the Captain wasn't worried. Then it happened again, and again, until he wouldn't come home until an unholy hour of the morning, and when he did, his breath reeked of the whiskey sold in the taverns. Again, the Captain let it slide, until one day, it became too much. She confronted him, and everything that had been building up exploded.

The Ram was tired, he was angry, and he had never asked for a child. Why should he be the one to bear the consequences? His ambitious confidence had morphed into a monstrous ego that had been poisoning him from the inside for a long time, and now he decided to spit the venom onto his family. He deemed himself worthy of a better life, one where he would lead and get all the glory he had worked towards, without anyone at his side to share it with.

The Captain was usually hot-headed and would have lashed out without a second thought. But that night she said nothing, and retreated back into a shell of her own making. The argument was over, and the next week passed by at a snail's pace. They didn't talk to each other, and he kept coming home late and drunk, until one night, he never returned. Down at the harbour the next day, the Captain heard from the sailors' whispers that a ship had left the night before, and the Ram was on board.

She was not embarrassed to say that she cried. Just like they had a year or so prior, the Ram had left, with no intention to ever return. Only this time, he had gone alone. She never saw him again, and perhaps it was for the best.

The Ram, after over a decade of searching, eventually came across a small nation fresh out of a revolution, and who needed a leader. Finally, his prayers of leadership and control had been answered. His charisma and ambition won him the election, and he made quick work of his new nation. He was branded as a dictator for his actions, *but that's another story for another time.*

The Captain tried to keep her and her son afloat in a world she now knew was not smooth and as gentle as it seemed. She worked extra hours down in the harbour, raking in what she could as money, and her son was thankfully looked after by an elderly neighbour when she was gone. She tried to stay optimistic and hopeful about their future, but she was lying to herself.

One day, she came home battered, bruised and aching from the day's work, and her son looked up at her with large, beautiful eyes. He let out a small sound – not a gargle exactly, but a small bleat – and her heart broke. She couldn't do this to him. She couldn't make them both pay the price for her misjudged escapade from her home town with someone who abandoned her as soon as the opportunity showed up. The Captain was still young, and inexperienced in multiple different ways.

It was somewhat ironic that one of nature's most brutal forces, the sea, was the only thing she felt completely in control of.

She thought about what to do long and hard, and finally came to a decision. When her son was barely a year old, she gently picked him up, and they walked through the forest bordering the town. The woods were dark and gnarly, with thorns and tree trunks twisting and turning like large, terrifying creatures in front of her, looming over the young mother and her son. They were ready to pluck them both out of thin air, and take them to who knows where. The nettles stung her ankles as the under-brush became thicker and thicker, but she forced herself to squirm her way through the pain and keep going. Her little lamb tugged at her soft locks and velvet ears, delighted by the amusing, bumpy journey he was embarking on. He was so innocent, so pure. Eventually, sunlight managed to filter in, and the trees cleared to make room for a large road.

Everything was silent. The Captain, once she made sure that no one was around, ventured out to the track, and found a box abandoned to the side. It probably used to be full of goods heading towards one of the many commercial towns along the road, but now it was to hold a much more precious package. She gently placed her son inside of it, making sure he was safe and comfortable. He barely paid her any attention, too busy playing with the stuffed toy bee his father had given him a month or two before he finally left. His name was stitched into its tummy, and the Captain traced it one last time. She silently pleaded with her son to look up at her, but he didn't.

She whispered one last sentence of comfort to him. "I love you, my little lamb."

Then, she went and hid in the bushes, keeping her eyes on the box. She wouldn't let her son be snatched up by anyone; she wanted to make sure it could be someone she'd trust with his well-being. If not, she could intervene, and see it as a sign that she was strong enough to take care of him. That was all she was really looking for in the end. A sign. Fate was cruel, and liked to gamble. She was ready to bet. She didn't know how long she waited, crouched and scratched by the thorns and holly leaves, but it felt so much longer with her baby's frantic bleating, finally realizing that his mother was gone. She resisted the temptation to go and calm him, and had to clap her hands over her ears to avoid the calls finding a way down to her heart and make her cave in.

Turns out, only one being had come across the baby in the box, and as soon as she saw the shadow descend from the skies, she held back a gasp of fear. Death. Was the shadow of death the one who was to take her son away?

But as soon as the figure landed, the obsidian coloured wings drew back to reveal a man with gentle blue eyes and hair the colour of wheat that shone like a halo around his head. His elegant green robes glimmered like dew covered grass, and the large, floppy hat hanging on a string down his back was softly rustled by the wind. Perhaps not Death itself, but an angel coming to do Her bidding.

He looked too human and down to earth, however, and the Captain felt her panic start to ease. The man towered over the little, screaming lamb. "Hello there, mate," he chuckled, reaching down and picking him up. The baby continued to kick and scream, until his eyes were drawn to the dark wings behind his holder. He made little grabbing motions with his small fists, and the angel curved his wings to tickle the little one with his feathers. The terrified bleating soon turned into jovial little gurgles and giggles, and the man smiled. "You're a sweet little thing, aren't you?" His face suddenly fell. "Where are your parents?"

The baby didn't reply, and instead continued trying to pluck out fistfuls of feathers from his wings.

The angel looked around briefly, before locking eyes with a section of the undergrowth. The Captain sunk further into the forest, the angel's piercing blue eyes staring right into her own. She waited for him to walk over and say something, but he didn't. He stayed remarkably still, like a statue, then looked back down at the baby in his arms.

He reached into the box, and pulled out the stuffed bee. He read the name on its stomach. "It's alright, Tubbo," he whispered, just loud enough so the Captain could hear. "I'll take good care of you, I promise. You'll have brothers, and a nice warm home, and a loving father to take care of you. I promise."

Soon after, the angel took to the skies once again, carrying her little lamb towards a better place, and a better life. The Captain stayed for a few moments longer, then left as well. The tears had dried long ago.

She continued on with her life, and the heavy chains of her guilt began to lighten with every passing day. Eventually, she found her place back in the harbour, in the only world she knew like the back of her hand. Everything was familiar, and everything was under her control. She felt at ease, even when the raging storms rocked the wooden piers and threatened to capsize the ships bobbing along them. She threw herself into the sailor's life even more than she already had, quickly moving up through the ranks, until a new friend by the name of Sparklez suggested she gather her own crew. So she did, and finally became what she had always wanted to be.

Captain Puffy. It had a nice ring to it.

Her galleon, at first, was a small, rundown embarkation, but she and her crew-mates made quick work of it until it became a sea vessel worthy of the most fantastical adventures. And what adventures they had!

They followed stories instead of maps, the stars instead of set compasses, and their hearts instead of the dictated travelling routes. They lived the life of pirates, in every way except in name.

They searched for the treasures described in the ancient scriptures, and explored uncharted lands. Many of these tales turned out to be lies, but many also turned out to be true, and the hull was soon brimming with ancient artefacts, gems and golden coins. The only battles they waged were on hostile vessels who fired first, and they always won. The cargo of those defeated ships was soon added to their own, and their fortune was rising steadily.

This was the life the Captain had always strived for, and she finally got it. For years, all she did was embark on adventure after adventure, racking up a wealth worth more than that of many of the kingdoms she docked at, and building a legendary reputation in the process.

However, everything had to come to an end one day, and as it was for so many other people, November 16th was that date.

Her vessel was caught in a storm unlike any she had ever seen. The thunder rumbled, the lighting cracked, the waves rocked, and the torrential rain beat down on everyone's heads, ripping the sails apart. The Captain and her crew had spent the last few hours desperately trying to control the situation, but the lives cost were already numerous. Land was so close, and with a final push to get out of the worst of the cyclone, they would be safe.

The elements that had forever been in their favour were now using all their might against them, and the ship was thrown against a small island of jagged rocks just off the coast of the Greater SMP. The smoke from the remains of L'Manberg rose in the distance, and the crowds had started to disperse, taking the shoreline paths. Shouts of fear and dread were heard when the ship crashed, and all the poor souls on board were thrown off into the water.

The Captain was dragged under the waves, drowning with the treasure she held so dearly that fell around her like sparkling confetti, sinking to the sea floor and never to see again. She blacked out soon after when the air finally left her lungs, only to awake many hours later in a comfortable bed beside an open fire.

King Eret was by her side, and immediately snapped to attention as she woke. "She's alive!"

More footsteps ran over the stone floor as four more figures joined her bedside. "Is she alright?" Bad asked, worried out of his mind.

"She's waking up," Skeppy pointed out. "That's a good sign."

Antfrost was the next to speak. "Sam, were there any others?"

There was cough and a sneeze, followed by a reply from a soaking wet Sam, bundled up in a warm blanket and just as worried as everyone else. He shook his head. "All the others either drowned or were impaled on the rocks. She was the only one close enough to shore to save."

The Captain didn't understand where she was for a long, long time, or who these people were, but she did understand that her ship, her crew, and their entire cargo was lost, forever. The thought always haunted her. Later, she realized that she had lost one

of her own lives in the accident, and that also deeply troubled her along with all the other factors.

But the most important thing was that she was safe. King Eret was kind, and so were the Badlands. When she was well enough to leave the castle, she set off on another series of adventures, on foot this time. The Greater SMP and its surrounding nations were intriguing, and she was fascinated by the stories and the history behind them – and, strangely enough, everyone was fascinated by her and her own adventures, although she never liked to talk about her life. She was known as the sea captain who washed up on the shores, and who was now trying everything she could to be accepted in her new home. She helped the Badlands' leaders – who she had now grown close to – establish their own nation, and was even a knight in King Eret's guard for a while.

Then, word was spread that L'Manberg needed more workers to help rebuild their nation over the small crater it had become, and, always eager to offer her services, the Captain went to answer the call. That was when she met the new, young president of that nation, alone on a rocky peak overlooking the construction site.

She thought she was about to faint.

The fifteen-year-old President Tubbo and her had only exchanged a few words that day, and not too many in the months afterwards, but it was enough to drag up a whole other bag of memories she wished had sunk along with her ship. But that didn't stop her from working hard for L'Manberg, and later on following Tubbo to his new nation of Snowchester after Doomsday had come and gone.

Snowchester was ever so familiar to her homeland, and with her son living so close to her, yet oblivious and unknowing, the Captain felt a pang of bittersweet nostalgia hit her on the regular. With everything that had come crumbling down around her, from the Egg to betrayals from those she called her friends – as well as the added discovery of Schlatt's death – Tubbo and the spitting image of her home town were always there, no matter what.

They were strong and anchored, ready to welcome her with a happy little greeting or happy little memories, even if Captain Puffy would never get to live what could have been.

"Tubbo?"

The boy turned around. A bunch of white carnations were clenched in his hand, along with a few strands of sweet smelling lavender.

Puffy stopped in her tracks, her own bouquet held against her chest. Like Tubbo, she had brought a considerable amount of carnation flowers, along with one or two white lilies.

The walk to Tommy's grave along the moor had been windy and tiring, but she had finally reached the misshapen rock that marked his resting place. She tried to go as often as she could, when the coast was clear and the Eggpire weren't in that sector of the land. But now, after she was caught by Punz burning some of the tendrils, her job became even harder, and the work put into carefully planning her routes was as intricate and serious as an army general's battle plans. Despite everything, she prevailed; she still came frequently, and always alone. Occasionally, Sam would be up there too, and they would spend a few minutes in silence, just comforted in each other's company.

The gravestone and earth mound was always covered with an abundance of flowers. Subconsciously, Puffy and Sam must have put them there to make up for all the people who didn't journey through the moor and up the hill to pay their respects. They were still trying to make it up to a child who never got the love he deserved, even now. The captain no longer knew if it was endearing, or a little disturbing.

But today, someone else had come to visit, and it wasn't someone Puffy had expected to see. They hadn't seen each other – let alone talked – in weeks. Not only that, he hadn't turned up to the funeral, or even seemed to care at all about Tommy's death.

"Oh, hello Puffy..." Tubbo seemed a little nervous, skipping from foot to foot and twitching his ears. He was acting like he had been caught in the act of doing something he shouldn't, and was ready to run away at the first sign of reprimand.

The captain forced herself to give him a reassuring smile. She walked up to the grave, and gently lay down her bouquet next to a bunch of bright yellow daffodils. They looked freshly laid, and Puffy only knew of one person who could have done it. Sam had definitely added a splash of colour to the morbid and sorrowful arrangement. Tommy's final resting place had never looked so bright and colourful, as he once was.

The sheep lay her palm on the rock, and closed her eyes. There was a shuffle next to her, and when she opened them, Tubbo was kneeling down beside her, and had placed his own flowers beside the rest. His head was bowed, and his messy brown fringe still covered his eyes. The two, small horns on his head were barely visible, but Puffy knew they were there. They were tiny, and nothing like his father's. Schlatt's magnificent, sharp horns, curved around his ears like snakes constantly hissing into his ears, and were always more of a royal headpiece than anything. They were what gave him his power,

and his ability to be respected. The captain didn't have to have lived in Manberg during his administration to guess that.

All of Tubbo's sheep-like features were subtle and hidden, yet he had still managed to rebuild L'Manberg with the same fierce ambition his father had, and the determination. Yes, he had acted selfishly at times, and a few of his decisions had been questionable at best, but he was a good, honest leader. Nothing like Schlatt could have ever been in a million years, but Tubbo was still the dictator's son, no matter how hard Puffy tried to forget it.

Then again, what was the point in trying to pin all of the blame, hate and painful memories on Schlatt alone? She herself had been no better as a parent, and leaving her son was a decision that still haunted her to this day.

"What was the funeral like?" Tubbo suddenly asked her.

"Sad." It was such a simple, unremarkable word, and the way she said it made her reply seem indifferent and uncaring, but it was the only word she could use to speak the truth. It was sad, and there was nothing more she could say about it. There was no reason to glorify it. She looked at the boy. "It was sad."

Tubbo still held his head down, and nodded slowly. "Of course." His own reply didn't hint at any further questions, or the wish for an elaboration of any sort.

But Puffy had questions. Of course she did. She didn't ask any of them, for fear of angering or putting the boy in an uneasy situation. She kept her mouth shut. Why didn't Tubbo turn up to the ceremony? Why hadn't she seen him in weeks? Why was he suddenly here now?

"I wish I was there," he whispered, startling her. Had she spoken out loud? Tubbo was still refusing to look at her, and she didn't push him to. "I really do. Ranboo told me, and I just... I just... chickened out..." He drew his hands away from the flowers, and clasped them together. He was holding them so tightly that his skin was turning a ghostly white, and his nails dug into the backs of his hands.

"It's alright," Puffy tried to reassure him, resisting the urge to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "No one is mad at you for not turning up."

"Tommy would be," the boy replied, his tone hollow and as dead as the body resting below them. "Tommy would call me a pussy."

"Well..." The captain tried to hide her amused smile. "It's Tommy after all."

"It *was* Tommy." Tubbo sighed, and a long silence followed. The moor wind whistled over the tops of the hills and in between the crags and nooks in the stone boulders. The sea of heather rustled around them, the flowers and stems as dry as twigs. The two sheep braced their backs against the breeze, and watched as a few of the smaller flowers were carried off into the sky. Tubbo finally spoke again. "We had a fight before he... he..."

He didn't finish his sentence, and Captain Puffy wasn't going to make him do so. "A fight?" She was genuinely curious. "But you two never fought!"

"Except when I had to exile him, and when he returned with Technoblade, and when I realized I was a shit president, and..." he began to list off, likely out of spite. "Yeah, no, you're right. We never fought."

"That's not what I mean, Tubbo, and you know it."

Kids would always be kids, and would still never admit they were wrong or listen to the adults. "We had a fight, before he went to visit Pandora's Vault that... you know, that day." Of course Puffy knew what day he meant. The lockdown. Everyone knew what *that day* meant when talking about the prison.

"What did you fight about?" she asked him.

"Snowchester. Ranboo. Michael. The fact that we never spent time together any more. Everything I had been keeping on the low for ages, fearing that he'd lash out like he did. He was jealous of me, and called me a—"

"Alright. I can imagine, and I don't think we need to dive any deeper into Tommy's colourful vocabulary, do we?"

"Maybe not..." Tubbo let out a forced laugh. "And I get it. Maybe I did have everything going for me, and maybe we didn't spend as much time together as we should have, but he also had something I didn't." He paused. "He had you and Sam. You were always there for him, and you were good at taking care of him when no one else could."

Puffy tried to lighten the mood. "Don't ever say that to Sam's face," she warned him with a smile. "He won't believe you."

"But you were, you are. I didn't have that. I never had that..."

The captain wanted to prove him wrong. She wanted to tell him of the times when he was still a baby, in her own arms, and when he was loved more than anything in the world. She wanted to tell him about Schlatt, and how he used to love him too, even if it didn't last. But she couldn't. Anything she might have revealed would have been held against her for as long as either her or her son lived, she was sure of that. She didn't say anything.

"We got into a yelling match, and we were both so angry at each other." His hands travelled up his arms to grip his sleeves. "We said some hurtful things, and we went our separate ways. I wanted to give him time to cool off before apologizing and talking to him again, but the Vault went on lockdown, and—" He caught his breath. "A week later, Sam told us Dream had killed him. And I got even angrier at Tommy for that. The bastard didn't even let me apologize."

Tubbo's big "burst of emotion" on the day the warden came to bear the tragic news was a reaction Puffy would always remember. Sam's cheeks were red from crying and his voice was shaky, and paid no attention to the gentle Snowchester snowflakes drifting down onto him from the grey, miserable sky. Puffy and Ranboo were shocked, frozen messes, ready to burst out into tears. Tubbo just shrugged. "That sucks," he had said, then turned around and left. Puffy hadn't seen him since, until today.

The indifference in his attitude had momentarily stunned everyone, but the general surprise had soon turned to worry and sorrow as Ranboo collapsed to his knees, wailing. Yet Captain Puffy had still never managed to erase her son's tone from her memory.

That sucks.

Well, that's unfortunate.

Welp, now that's done, I can get on with my day.

No one in their right mind would ever say something like that about someone's passing. But now the sheep knew by finally talking to him, Tubbo wasn't in his right mind. At all. "Now he's gone..." he mumbled through dry, cracked lips.

"Now he's gone," Puffy echoed, her hand gently placed on the earth beneath them. She hoped that what was left of Tommy was still close enough to the surface to hear the voice of his best friend.

"First L'Manberg, then Tommy, and now Ranboo with his stupid confessions. Can't have shit here."

The captain had almost forgotten. *Ranboo*. Tubbo must have been taking the recent situation harder than anyone, although he didn't show it. She wanted to give him a tight hug, and reassure him that everything was alright. That he was safe. That he didn't have to go through this alone. That she would be with him now more than she ever was.

She resisted, and instead, did what Tubbo apparently did at Tommy's funeral. She chickened out. Captain Puffy stood up, and backed away. She could have said something, a goodbye, perhaps. The only trace of her exit was the change in the wind, and that's what she wanted. An invisible, gentle exit.

"I miss him, Puffy!"

She froze in her tracks, and turned around. Tubbo stared back at her. Actually stared back. He had pushed his floppy brown fringe out of his eyes, and after so long, she finally got to see his eyes. They were as blue as the deep oceans they were both born beside, and brimming with sparkling tears. His bottom lip quivered, and Tubbo finally cried after months of undoubtedly bottling everything up. The storm in the boy was back, and the sobbing was loud, powerful even. "I miss him more than anything!" His cries increased in both quantity and volume, until he bent over, his face red.

Captain Puffy ran towards him, and immediately swept him into the biggest hugs she had ever given anyone. He was not much shorter than she was, and she rested her head on his own, letting her little lamb cry into her chest for as long as he wanted to. She wouldn't move, she wouldn't say anything, and she wouldn't even look at him until he let her. Puffy would stay for as long as her baby would need her. She would never find the right words or the courage to ever make up with him, but she could at least do this. And maybe it was selfish of her, but as Tubbo sobbed into her arms, mourning a part of himself now lying six feet below, she felt complete.

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Second Visit

And yet, completion can only last for so long. Even the most indestructible, magnificent buildings built with love, toil, tears and sweat will one day crumble to the

ground, cave in, or even get vandalized. No matter how completed it may seem when it's finished, it will never stay in one piece. It has to fall.

Destruction, ruin, age counter the full and perfect completion of these temples, castles and quaint little cottages.

Dream was the counter to Captain Puffy's own completion. Her antithesis.

The warm, welcoming feeling within her when comforting Tubbo was quickly whisked away the further and further she was led into Pandora's Vault, until everything had shattered completely when she reached the holding cell. She came prepared, but the whole experience was still a drag and gloomy.

Sam was there, of course, the only other living thing in the Vault apart from herself. There was too much stone in the prison, too much obsidian, too much cold redstone, and too much lava. He was there, but he didn't feel like himself.

Puffy had never truly seen Sam as the Warden. She had definitely heard about it from others, however. It was certainly a strange shock to her system, to see him so strict and upright, the lower half of his face covered by his gasmask.

He greeted her with a nod and nothing more, went through the procedures with a severe diligence, and then led her into the prison's maze. She was hesitant at first, as anyone would be, to embark down the dark, shadowy corridors, and that was the first and only time he held her hand through the whole experience.

His grip was strong, but still comforting, and the first stretch of the journey was done slowly. He kept glancing back, eyes briefly registering her presence before guiding her on.

And something strange began to happen to Puffy's mind. In a place so hard and cold, built from the ground's own treasures, the edges of her thoughts were hazy, dreamy even.

The dark hallways, the occasional lava pockets that shone and flickered like candles, and the brooding, caped figure leading her throughout. There was something about it all that made her think she was hallucinating, enchanted against her will by some sort of dark magic that bent her mind, shackling it to the Warden and his power over Pandora's Vault.

He dropped her hand sometime around the first lava defence in order to ferry them across, and didn't take it again afterwards. The only closest thing to affection she received after was a small, soft look before she ventured over to the holding cell – even then, she was almost certain it was a trick of the light.

In that moment of realization, the enchantment ended.

Now, she was alone.

Alone with the prisoner bearing a name too comforting for what he was, and what he had done.

"Puffy!" The way her name rolled so delicately and warmly off Dream's tongue sent a chill up her spine. She refused to reply, holding her head high and glaring daggers at him.

His demeanour did not falter. "It's great to see you after so long," he continued, smiling. He seemed genuinely enthralled to see her.

The sheep, not so much. "Sam said you wanted to see me," she told him, her tone sharp and cold. Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I missed you," the criminal grinned, standing up. He started to saunter towards her. "I wanted to see you again–"

"Stay back!" Puffy tried to keep her emotions under control. She tried to retain the hard tone she had, and frantically tried to mask her growing fear. She tried so hard, and she felt everything was doomed to fail.

That void in her heart that Tubbo's abandonment had left was one that had been constantly filled and refilled throughout the years. Sometimes, it was repaired by the attention she gave to the younger sailors that were once in her crew, or the stowaways that crept onto her ship to try and escape to a better life. Recently, her affection had been shared between Tommy, a newly found Tubbo, and now Michelle. But that hole was never truly fixed, and Dream was merely one of those temporary patches that eventually fell off or was mercilessly ripped away from her. Only this time, her mourning was lighter than what it could have been if he was someone else. Anyone else.

To her surprise, Dream stopped in his tracks, and retreated back a few steps. "Of course," he apologized. "I do still scare people, even defenceless and imprisoned–"

"Stop." He was trying to push all her buttons, waiting for an outburst. She knew exactly what he was referring to. "Just... stop."

"You sound tired," he pointed out to her, to which the captain gritted her teeth.

"I *am* tired. I'm tired of everything, and I'm tired of you not giving me a straight answer. Why am I here?"

"And I already answered that. Sam gave me three visits, and I wanted to see you."

"Who are the two others?"

Dream smiled. "I'm sorry to say that information is strictly confidential," he said. "That stays between me and the warden."

"Fine." Puffy crossed her arms in front of her chest. "How have you been?"

"Could be better."

"There. I asked you a question, you answered, and you've seen me. I can leave now."

"You can indeed."

The sheep stood up straighter. "You're right, I can." She turned to the lava wall. She was about to call for Sam. She opened her mouth. *Sam, let me out. I want to go home.* It was an easy task. Then why wasn't she talking?

"Cat got your tongue?" the prisoner asked her, a smirk ever so audible in his tone.

Captain Puffy turned back to face him. He was grinning like a fool at her incapacity to do something as simple as calling for her friend. Suddenly, she remembered. She remembered why she had immediately leapt at the opportunity to visit Dream, even though she knew nothing about the real reason why it was offered to her in the first place. She remembered why, even as Sam – her most trusted friend – guided her through the security checks, she still felt nervous, paranoid even, that he would find something on her.

It had been a long and difficult decision to make, and one that she had weighed out the pros and cons for multiple times, but one she had eventually decided to go through with. She had been putting it off until now, hoping for another way out. But there was none.

"I've brought you something," she whispered after a while.

Dream's eyes sparked, intrigued. "Really?"

Puffy let the question linger in the hot, stuffy air for a while, her hands clammy and moist. She couldn't put it off any longer. Shaking, she reached round the back of her neck, and dug her hand somewhere into the thick part of her fleece. When her fingers closed around the scratchy piece of sack material, she paused. Her former hesitation returned, but she soon cast it aside, and removed the package. The curls of her hair were still latched onto it, but sprung back when the gift was pulled from their grasp. Dream's eyes hungrily followed her every movement, impatient. Puffy felt them burn through her, but kept her attention locked on the small, square package. Nervously, she unfolded it.

Three, gleaming red berries sat in her palm, and she let the corners of the material drop. They looked like bright red olives, with a polished exterior and a small, dark seed in the middle. The sheep took a deep breath, and moved closer to Dream. She held out her hand, trying to keep it as steady as she could. "I picked these near Kinoko," she said quietly.

Dream took one look at the berries, and smiled. "That's very thoughtful of you," he thanked her. He gestured to a corner of his cell, near a bunch of rotten flowers that filled the air with a sickly sweet odour. "You can leave them there."

Puffy's semi-calm demeanour faltered, and her arm went rigid. She held out the red berries, suddenly insistent. "Take them, right now." She stepped forwards.

Dream smiled again. "That's very kind of you, but no."

"Eat them."

"No." The grin stayed.

Puffy's face was soon twisted by anger, and went as far as shoving her offering in his face. "Eat them right now, in front of me," she hissed with a warning undertone. "It's rude to reject a present offered out of the kindness of someone's heart." The word "kindness" cut deep inside Puffy, but she was too frantic to care.

Dream's whole face was laughing. Laughing at her discomfort, and her oncoming temper. "No," he repeated, his tone tender and gentle.

The sheep's desperation rose at his insolence, until her voice went up an octave, and increased in volume. "Eat them right now!" she ordered, yelling. "OR I'LL SHOVE THEM DOWN YOUR MISERABLE THROAT!" A mix of anger and desperation consumed her entire body, and her breathing came out short and sharp. Her ears flattened against her scalp. Her eyes were narrowed, suppressing agony-filled tears.

Dream watched her slowly crumble, with as much insincerity as was humanly – or rather, inhumanly – possible. She knew he was. Her suffering was his own show. "I have to say that I'm impressed," he said. "You managed to get a weapon past the warden. Perhaps he isn't as thorough with his security as I'm certain you all believe he is..."

"Sam trusts me," Puffy spat back, still holding out the red berries. Now the warden was being brought in, she became even angrier.

"Should he though?" the prisoner asked her, clicking his tongue. He nodded in the direction of the lava, a few meters behind the sheep. "I could just call him right now, and tell him what you're trying to do–"

"You won't," the captain interrupted. "I know you won't." Despite her confident tone, she still trembled at the idea of being caught red-handed in the middle of a murder.

Dream shrugged, nonchalant. "You're right; I won't." He walked towards her, still clearly marvelling in her discomfort. She couldn't move, paralysed. Softly, he closed her hand back around the seeds. He leaned in and whispered into her ear, his voice as sweet and rotten as the smell of the wilted roses. "Just like how I know you won't poison me." Before she could answer, he continued. "I know what yew berries look like. I'm not stupid."

"How do you know I won't?" Puffy uttered, quaking as Dream's hand touched her own.

"Because you still care about me," the criminal grinned. He chuckled. "I'm your little duckling, am I not?"

There it was. The little duckling.

It took a while to finally get to it, but it was there, just as Puffy had expected.

Little duckling...

Well, what else was she supposed to call the tall, green-eyed warrior with the eerie, smiling mask when he used to follow her around, back when she washed up on the shores of the Greater SMP? Being a pirate in everything but in name, there were many people that would have wanted to hang her on the gallows, or wring her neck with their bare hands.

But when not only the Badlands, the monarch of the SMP, and now the most feared fighter in all the land stood by her side, nothing could be done by the people except come to love and accept her.

Dream was always kind, willing, and funny around her, and their long walks across the factions' territories had always been blissful. The warrior had been somewhat thoughtful back then as well, always making sure to walk a few steps behind the captain so she didn't have to run to catch up with him and his long legs. That's what started that whole "little duckling" situation, and Puffy liked it.

Staring at the prisoner again, however, with a heavy dose of poison in her hands, that nickname sounded mocking, and left behind a sour taste. "I care more about others than you," the sheep spat back, defensive. "And the sooner you're dead, the better it'll be for everyone."

"So, you do admit that you still care about me a little."

"Yes." She finally cracked. "Yes, I do, and I know what's best for you. Eat the berries."

Dream's knowing smile turned into a sneer. "Pathetic," he scoffed. "You're not my mother. You're only a few years older than me—"

"— and that doesn't mean I can't look out for you." Puffy's insistence returned, although much more subdued. Her anger started to fade into sternness, but a sternness meant in the best of ways. Maybe it was pathetic, as Dream said, but it was the only way she could keep herself calm.

He seemed to know it. "Wow, are all parents so eager to kill their children? Or are you and Sam the only exceptions?"

"Sam didn't kill Tommy," Puffy jumped in, springing to the warden's defence. "You did!"

"Ranboo did too," the prisoner said. "And so did Sam, and so did Tommy's own stupidity. Everyone had a part in it. I merely carried out the final part of the show." Tommy's death being described as a spectacle was sickening, and Captain Puffy could never understand how she could have ever cared for the prisoner. "Has it ever crossed your mind why Sam hasn't murdered me?" Dream suddenly asked her. He stepped away from her, and ambled to the back of his cell.

Puffy watched him, without a word. She could call for the warden at any time; she knew she could. Sam was probably as anxious as she was to get her out of there. Then again, her fear and anger had been replaced by a strange, morbid curiosity that made her listen to him. She hadn't thought about it before.

Why didn't Sam kill Dream? Why didn't he take the opportunity when it was given? Why didn't he kill him to avenge Tommy?

"Oh, sure, he injured me," Dream continued, displaying a festering shoulder wound by pulling down the collar of his shirt. She pushed down the gag reflex rising in her throat, transfixed by the large, dark scabs. "And he left me to rot in this damp hole. But do you know why he hasn't murdered me?"

No? Puffy shook her head. Her vocal chords did not want to cooperate.

The prisoner spoke again now he had her full attention. "Now, either he prefers to see me suffer than protect the ones he loves," he began, brushing the implication off like a mere speck of dust. He turned away, then briefly glanced back. "Or he needs me."

"Needs you?" the sheep repeated, her concern growing. "Why would he need you?"

"For the same reason that you all decided to lock me in here in the first place."

She furrowed her brow. "What?"

A loud laugh filled the room once again. Dream clapped his hands together. "You're all no better than Ranboo," he said, making the sheep shiver. He strode up to her once again, and grabbed her shoulders. She tried to worm her way out, to no avail. His eyes pierced hers, gleaming. "Puffy, Sam asked me to revive Tommy!"

A sharp breath left her mouth, and she froze to the spot. The berries escaped from her hand, and bounced across the obsidian floor. "What...?"

"I know! I don't know what took him so long either!" He let go, and happily began to pace his dark, dingy cell. His smile was the brightest thing in it, but far from being the warmest. He suddenly stopped, and turned back to her. "What's wrong?"

So much. So much was wrong. Puffy's stomach began to ache, and she leaned against the wall for support.

Dream moved towards her again. "Are you alright?" he asked her, reaching out.

She pushed him away. "SAM!" she yelled, turning to the lava. "SAM, LET ME OUT!"

Her eyes darted around, casting brief glances towards Dream. He stood completely still, watching as she called for the warden. His gaze was indecipherable. Turning to the lava, he called out too. "SAM! The visit is over!"

"Did he hurt you?"

Captain Puffy looked up. The Warden had all but vanished. In his place was Sam gently stroking her shoulder, trying to soothe her from the obvious uneasiness she was experiencing, and looking down at her with nothing but the purest affection in his eyes. She stared into them, and saw nothing familiar. She was looking into the eyes of a stranger.

She shrugged him off, and turned away. "He didn't," she said through gritted teeth.

The captain could sense the warden's hesitance in the way his breathing hitched. It took a moment before he spoke again. "Did he... say anything?"

"Yes." She made sure he knew she was on the verge of bringing a storm down upon him.

Whether he realized that or not, he didn't let it show. "Let's get you out of here." He ushered her away from Dream's holding cell, and down the hallways of the Vault.

After only a minute or two, Captain Puffy stopped in her tracks, and resisted Sam's attempts to urge her on. "We need to talk," she said.

Sam tried to move her along again. "And I need to get you out of here, Captain," he replied, all traces of potential understanding erased by the harsh use of her title.

She stood her ground. "No." She shook him off again as he grabbed her shoulder, and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "We're going to talk right now, right here."

She watched intently as the warden rolled his eyes, and snapped to attention in front of her. "Fine. A quick chat. Then, I *need* to get you out of here." He was so much taller than her, and the sheep only came up to his shoulder, but she would not let that – or the sharp, shining trident in his hand – deter her from confronting him. She glared at him, hoping to see him shift, uncomfortable. Sam stood remarkably still and composed, albeit clearly a little annoyed with her.

There was no point in darting around the subject, so she went out and said it. "You're going to revive Tommy."

Puffy watched closely for an answer. A blink, a breath, a clenched hand. Anything that could confirm or deny the statement. However, she didn't need any of that, as Sam replied on his own accord. "Did Dream tell you that?"

"No, I guessed." It was a lie, but one that she decided to keep up. She wanted to know. She wanted to be sure. And she hoped she was wrong. Sam's stoic, orderly stance slackened, and began to crumble before her. Her stomach sank. "You're... you're going to do it, aren't you?"

"I was going to tell you."

"That's not... I..." Puffy let her eyes wander away briefly as she tried to let his words sink in. She glared back at him. "Take off your mask."

"What?"

"I want to see you," she replied.

"I'm on the job."

"And I don't *care*." There was a moment of hesitation as the warden was mulling over her demand, and he removed the gas-mask from his nose and mouth. Finally, she could talk to the friend she thought she knew. "What. The. Fuck. Sam."

He blinked at her, questioning. "What?"

"What the fuck?" she yelled. "What the fuck are you going to do?" She couldn't remember the last time she had sworn this much, and coming from a sea captain, that said a lot.

"What do you mean?" Sam was getting just as worked up as she was, although he was clearly trying to make an effort to keep it bottled up.

But Puffy was having none of that. She let loose. "Reviving Tommy? That's insane! What's gotten into you?"

"Puffy, you can't be serious—"

"*You* can't be serious!"

"I am!" His raised voice echoed around the obsidian hallway, and rebounded back onto the sheep. The vibrations rang in her ears, and she tensed up. "I *am* serious, Puffy." He reached out to hold her hands, and reluctantly, she let him. "The Revival Book is the only reason he's still alive and locked up, remember?"

"Then why don't you just take the book from him? All of this would be so much simpler if—"

"It's much more complicated than that." She waited for him to offer an elaboration on his vague explanation, but he said nothing. He squeezed her hands. "You just have to trust me on this."

His touch, even through the fabric of his gloves, was warm and soft. It was comforting. He was comforting. In any other situation, she would have caved in to the warmth and let her emotions flow, forgiving him and opening up about her troubles. But not today.

She slipped her own hands out of his grasp, and stepped away. "I don't think I can," she mumbled. "Not this time." Sam made no move to hold her back, although he opened his mouth to try and say something. Most likely, to ask her what she meant. She rushed to find a retort. "How do you know Tommy even *wants* to be revived?"

"Puffy..."

"He talked about the revival powers being used for everyone else, not him!"

"You can't honestly believe that he would prefer to be known as the boy who died in the prison, alone and afraid."

"I don't know, and neither do you!"

"You're looking into this too much."

"Am I? *Am I?*"

She felt his hands again. "Calm down," he murmured as her breathing became shorter and sharper. "Take a few breaths. You're delusional."

Puffy glared at him "You're the delusional one!" she cried, aghast. "You can't let go, Sam! Tommy's dead. He's gone, and this revival book probably doesn't even exist! You're putting too much trust in someone who lies for a living, and for what? To cry when it all inevitably turns out to be an elaborate act?"

It was harsh, and the words cut her as much as must have been cutting Sam, but she got it out. So far, no weapons had been pulled on her, not that she thought any would.

"I can't let go of a child I love? Look at yourself! You're a hypocrite!"

The captain's jaw dropped when he spoke. "Excuse me?"

"Don't think I don't know about Tubbo!" Sam suddenly exclaimed, catching her full attention. She felt the fleece on the back of her neck stand up, and her ears began to twitch nervously.

"Tubbo?" she ventured after swallowing down the growing fear inside her. "I don't see—"

"I see how you speak to him, how you look at him! He even looks like you! I'm not blind, Puffy!" Sam had raised his voice again, before lowering it once more to a softer tone. It was too soft to be comforting, or reassuring. It sounded what a heartbreak felt like, and the captain would know. "You couldn't even tell me about that time in your life, could you? And whatever happened between you and Schlatt as well, for that matter. I've noticed other things too."

The mere mention of Schlatt made her blood boil, and she raised her chin up. Guilt began to gnaw at her.

Sam continued, his voice just as broken as before. "You say you trust me, Puffy, but you don't. Not really. What do you think I'd do if I knew? Do what Ranboo did and tell everyone, defacing you in the process? Of course not!"

In all honesty, she didn't know. The thought had never crossed her mind, as many things in her past were memories she tried to drown like the deepest of shipwrecks.

He reached for her again. "I love you, and you don't have to bear any of these burdens alone... I'll always be here for you, come what may."

She stepped out of his way, her fury rising once again. "I could say the same for you, speaking of bearing burdens, and trust, and all of that," she said, bitterly. "The prison, Sam. It's consuming you. You're paranoid, and you're going downhill. I barely get to see you any more." She turned the question back on him. "Why haven't you trusted me, or anyone else with what's really going on?" She waited for him to butt in and provide an answer, but to her dismay, he remained silent. "You need help, and chasing some fantasy about bringing back the dead isn't going to help. I would help you too, whatever happens, but *you* don't trust *me* either."

Again, Sam said nothing. He didn't even look at her. He wouldn't reply, and it hurt. It really did. The friendship they had built together was starting to crumble right before their eyes, like a building.

Incomplete, imperfect, and unstable.

Captain Puffy's consciousness screamed at her to stay quiet before things derailed even further, but once she got going like an ocean storm raging in the high seas, she couldn't stop. "And Michelle?" she asked. "What about her? You promised you'd come and see her, and when have you ever shown up? Never."

"I'm not her father, and you know that."

"But I wish you acted like it." She cracked, and told him what she had wanted to for ages now. "She's asked about you, and all I've told her is that you're busy. I can't keep lying to her like this."

Sam's gaze still didn't betray his emotions. "You're not lying to her. I am busy." He straightened his spine again, as rigid as a sentinel. "My duty doesn't have room for trust or emotions."

"Yet still, you can't help but express them." Puffy sighed. "You're alive, Sam. You're one of the only people still *alive* in this place."

"And that's why I'm going to bring Tommy back. I don't expect you to understand, or agree with it. My duty as a warden is to protect everyone from Dream and the harm he's done, and that's what I'll do."

But was bringing Tommy back really protecting him? That was the main question that invaded her mind as Sam led her back to the entrance. Tommy was such a troubled kid, whose life had always been a roller-coaster with far more downs than ups. Would bringing him back truly solve anything? Was Dream merely playing a sick and twisted game with Sam, the only person close enough for him to control?

Sam was clearly not going to tell her. He seemed to know what he was doing, and was definitely not going to listen to a voice of reason. A voice of reason, as Puffy reluctantly reminded herself, that he no longer trusted. The truth finally sank in, and the captain now knew what complete and utter devastation was. Even if their rift died down, their relationship would never be the same again, and she couldn't bear that.

As Captain Puffy began to realize, completely losing something was far better than having a strain on it. Recognizable, except for one, agonizing detail. She had learned that with Tubbo especially. Her own son had no idea who she was to him.

So, in a last effort to save both her and the warden from a searing pain that would break them both, she spoke. "You're lucky I didn't poison him then."

Sam stopped in his tracks. In the light of the redstone lamps, his golden armour glinted like the sun. He spun around, his eyes wide. "You... WHAT?!"

Puffy kept her composure. "Poisoned Dream," she said, as calmly as she could. "The only reason he's still alive is because he was too smart to eat the yew berries."

The warden looked appalled. Horrified. And as time dragged on and his shocked expression faded, it turned to a cold, sharp fury. "Captain." Her title cut through her like a smooth, icy blade, but she did nothing. "I trusted you enough to lighten the security checks, and now—"

"We've established that there is no trust between us any more. What I did was bound to happen."

"I thought you would be sensible!" The warden gripped his trident, fuming. "Gods above, Tubbo's lucky that you stayed out of his life." He glared at her. "You and Schlatt must have made a pretty, lying pair."

His words, spoken in a furious tone, were harsh and spur of the moment. Puffy did not know if they were honest or not. For her own sake, she believed they were. "And Tommy is just as lucky that you're not in his life or death any more!"

As soon as she finished her sentence, a loud hissing began to fill the air. It sounded like a fuse. Puffy's demeanour immediately changed from composed to terrified. Her eyes were glued to Sam, who had dropped his trident and was pressing his arm and forehead against the cold black walls of the corridor. His chest rose and fell in short, quick spasms, and his breathing was sharp. He was gritting his teeth, and his eyes were screwed shut. A stench began to rise from him, one that Puffy would always remember from the canons in her ships, and Doomsday.

The smell of gunpowder.

"Sam...?" Her hostility faded almost immediately, replaced by panic as the creeper hybrid groaned in pain.

She went to approach him, only to have him abruptly snatch up his trident from the floor and start advancing menacingly towards her. "I SHOULD KILL YOU RIGHT NOW FOR DEFYING MY ORDERS!" he yelled, breathing faster and faster.

The prongs pressed against her neck, and she didn't dare move, too terrified of what could happen to her. For a while, all she did was stare into his eyes, searching them for a trace of warmth and friendship. When she found none, her terror died down. The frightened sheep soon turned into a stone cold being. She held the trident, and pushed the prongs in deeper.

"Go ahead, High And Mighty Warden," she whispered, unfazed by his sudden confusion. "Kill me. Stab me. Rip out my organs and watch as I bleed out at your feet. You should be used to that by now. Then blame Dream. Blame Pandora's Vault. Blame Tommy. Blame Tubbo. Blame Schlatt. Blame yourself. I don't care."

I don't care.

Those were the last words she said to him. Puffy left the prison soon after, in complete silence. Sam's rage had dwindled, although he was still visibly rigid and tense. As the Nether portal was opened, the captain stepped through without a look back.

The night was freezing, and the new moon gave off only the faintest of light. The stars speckled the sky like thousands of mean, little eyes on a beast bigger than the world itself. And like the raging ocean waves, Puffy was off, with no goodbyes, no cares and no reason. It took all her willpower to stop herself from turning back to the Vault, but she inevitably did. One of the blazing fires in the watchtowers was shadowed by a figure. A figure who watched her grow the distance between them with every step. Finally, when she got onto the Prime Path, the shadow left his perch on the tower.

A small bit of the captain died.

Gin rummy.

That was another funny term. It was a card game, or so Clay said. Tommy had no reason to doubt him. Anyway, everything seemed to line up when the man began to place a number of cards in front of them both.

"I'll teach you the rules as we go," Clay said with a smile, shuffling and stacking the rest of the cards into a pile.

Tommy nodded eagerly, and began to rifle through his deck. He hadn't spent that much time with his friend in recent days, simply because every time Sam's footsteps echoed from behind the lava, Clay would send the phantom away. Tommy was spending a lot of time wandering the Vault, again. He didn't mind as much as he did before, but leaving Clay alone still gave him a little twinge of guilt.

The cards in question were apparently cut from some of Clay's notebooks. Cut was perhaps too elaborate a word to describe the way they were made; torn would be much more accurate. The edges were frayed and uneven, and no two cards were the same. The symbols were drawn on in the same, black ink, and though the entire deck looked a little scrappy, Clay had still seemingly made an effort with his creation.

"I mean, it is a little complicated," Clay said. "But you're a smart kid, Tommy. You'll get the hang of it."

Tommy nodded again, just as eagerly. He was ready.

His friend's eyes narrowed, clearly competitive. "May the best man win." He reached out to pull a card from the pile, when a loud noise made them both look around. The lava started to fall yet again, and Clay sighed. "Can't ever catch a break in this place, can I?" He gave Tommy a look.

The phantom knew exactly what that look meant, and he reluctantly put down his deck of cards, letting out a small huff in the process. Then, he ambled over to a dark corner of the room and sat down beside the rotting yellow roses, just as Sam set foot into the black box.

"Can I help you?" Clay asked, idly twirling a card between his fingers. Tommy hadn't paid much attention until now, but his friend had since rearranged their prepared game of "gin rummy" into a strange grid he had never seen before.

Sam stopped. Tommy sank further into the shadows. "Are you busy?"

"Well..." Clay looked down. "I was playing a round of solitaire before you came."

The warden cast a brief look at the floor. "That doesn't look like solitaire."

"I never said I was good at it," he tutted. "Anyway." Clay brushed the cards away. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

The ghost looked up. Sam's reply was too quick, and too sharp. He took a closer look at him, and at the expression he seemed to be hiding behind his mask. He couldn't see much from where he was, but he knew that the newcomer was far from alright. Clay cocked an eyebrow. "Nothing?"

Sam took a deep breath. "I just wanted to see the only person that still tells me the truth."

Tommy watched as Clay's expression changed from curious to surprised, and then he smiled. "I'm honoured," he hummed, picking up the cards again. He began to shuffle them. "Are you up for a round of blackjack?"

Tommy expected Sam to grumble an excuse and leave both the phantom and Clay alone again, but to his surprise, he sat down on the floor opposite the other man. "Alright, but just one."

"Just one," Clay agreed with a wider grin.

"And do not make me bet the prison keys or your freedom."

"Who said anything about betting?" He began to deal the makeshift cards. He paused half way through. "Although that's a good idea now you mention it..."

"I'm serious."

"I know you are." Tommy watched his friend chuckle, and shake his head.

Now the cards were put in place, they began to play. Tommy was lost as soon as Sam said the word "hit". Their movements and voices were fluid and never hesitant, and it was almost as if everything they did was pre-planned to perfection. Before long, a triumphant Sam seemingly won the game, and that one round turned into two. Then three. Then four. Then... Tommy stopped counting after five. All the phantom could do was watch.

He was tired of watching everything, and rarely being a part of it. Even when he was, there was nothing light and airy about his presence. He was a burden, a heavy prison chain reluctant companions dragged around with them. He didn't understand the rules of "black Joe" or whatever it was called, but it still looked fun. He still wanted to play.

Yet Clay had pushed him away, to wallow in the dark corner with the remains of the flowers. Like the roses, he felt like he was rotting away in his solitude. He hated it.

"You're good at this," Clay suddenly piped up, snapping the ghost's attention back to the series of games.

Contrasting heavily with his previous, serious expressions, Sam smiled. "It's simple maths," he replied, shifting into a more comfortable position.

"Fine, you can be the dealer." Clay pushed the cards towards the warden, and crossed his arms.

Sam smirked, and began to shuffle the deck. "Not used to being a loser?" he teased.

Clay shrugged. "Even after losing everything I had and being put in this place, no."

Tommy watched as Sam's hand hovered over the cards momentarily, before dealing them with much less enthusiasm. "Now I know what that feels like..."

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Purple Eyes

"I've made my decision."

Captain Sparklez watched her intently. The sun was blazing above them in a clear sky. The waves were gentle and the briney air was refreshing to everyone's senses. Sparklez's galleon looked as magnificent as ever, anchored at the harbour and being loaded with the last few crates of supplies. The winds that billowed out the sails were strong, and favourable for the departure. "And...?"

Captain Puffy sighed. "I'm staying here."

Her friend gave her a knowing smile. "I knew you'd say that," he laughed.

"I almost caved in yesterday," she told him. "I really did."

"Really? How come?"

She hesitated, the guilt from the night before still weighing heavily around her neck like an iron shackle. She would never forget the feeling of Sam's trident pressed against her throat, or the wild glare in his eyes. "I just did. But then I realized that running away from my problems wasn't the way to go."

Sparklez didn't ask any follow-up questions, and merely just gave her a little reverence. "I'm glad you figured that out," he said. He placed his hat back on top of his head. "You've got a good life here Puffy. Don't throw it away."

Don't throw it away. She had a sneaking suspicion that she already had. "I won't," she replied, trying to banishing the darkened thoughts

"Give my greetings to your daughter," Sparklez added as an afterthought. "She's wonderful. You're wonderful together."

"Thank you." Captain Puffy was never used to answering in short, plain answers, and she could see that her friend had noticed too.

He gave away the fact that he could see right through her charade with a playful punch to her arm. "Everything will turn out alright," he said. "Even if that means I need to salvage a smile on my travels and give it to you. The greatest of treasures for the greatest of friends."

His words were comforting, but they hurt. Oh, how they hurt her, cutting deep like sharp blades and draining the air from her like a burst balloon. She didn't hide it any more, and let her face fall. "I'll find it again soon enough," she reassured him. "It just might take time."

"Then take that time, and more besides. Just promise me you'll be wearing it the next time I see you." A loud, brass bell was wrong, accompanied by the shouts of the galleon's crew. Both captains looked up, and Sparklez grinned. "I have to go." He turned back to her.

Puffy gave him a quick, two fingered salute. "So long, Captain," she said.

He returned her gesture. "So long, Captain," he echoed.

With those final words of goodbye, Captain Sparklez set off down the pier. Everyone in his way immediately stepped to the side, and sent him off with their own salutes and bows. Once he got to the walkway, he stopped. The sheep watched as he turned back to her, and she gave him a little wave. All she got back was a warm gaze and a nod, but that was more than enough to warm her from the end of her ears to the tip of her toes. Sparklez boarded his boat without a second glance, and the last shadow of him she saw was on the deck, standing out against the brilliant white masts. The last of the provisions were loaded not too long afterwards. The heavy anchor was raised, covered in barnacles and seaweed after a week of docking, and before she knew it, the ship left the Greater SMP.

Captain Puffy made her way to the end of the pier, and waited beneath the scorching sun until Sparklez and his crew disappeared over the horizon. She wanted to linger as long as possible, wanting to make sure that she wasn't regretting her final decision.

She couldn't deny it; the offer to leave once again had been interesting. Tantalizing, even, and after the incident at the Vault the night before, she had even started packing a bag, ready to leave.

But then she looked out across the Snowchester cabins, to a lit window belonging to the biggest one, and then to the young piglin sleeping soundly in her cosy little bed beside the fire. She unpacked everything as quickly as she had stuffed it all in. There were other things she couldn't live without. A lost friendship was nothing compared to what she could have left behind. At least, that's what she told herself many a time, even now as her chance to leave sailed further and further away from her.

It still hurt. Of course it would. Sam was right when it came to some things, but he was also wrong in others. So was Puffy. The two of them were even, and neither of them wanted to tip the scales. Just as stubborn as each other, and just as well meaning. A perfect, destructive match.

Yes, losing his companionship hurt, but the pain would dull as time dragged on. These sorts of things always did. She could forget everything, and start again, except she couldn't. Forgetting was just as cowardly as running away. It was the easy way out.

Captain Sparklez's ship finally disappeared over the waves, and her friend sailed towards new adventures. Meanwhile, Captain Puffy was left with hers on the mainland. With a deep breath, she turned around, and went back the way she came. Her steps were slow and steady, her mind preoccupied by her strange longing for the sea. The Prime Path was bustling as the Greater SMP's market was in full swing, with stalls lining the roads. It was teeming with buyers, and Puffy was soon distracted by the sheer diversity of the people around her. She held her head high, and began to push through the masses.

Exotic flavours weaved a fine carpet of smells in the air, that soon descended on the crowds like a light, magic carpet. Cries echoed from behind the stalls as the merchants desperately tried to sell their wares. Angry, stingy buyers scoffed loudly at overpriced trinkets and spices. Children laughed and ran past, holding wooden swords and toys aloft. A stray dog yapped at a thief's heels.

The captain continued her trek, forcing herself to marvel at the market and distract herself from her thoughts and her wishes to escape over the horizon. All her senses peaked, and she let the crowds carry her wherever they wanted to shove her. All skin tones, all factions, all voices, all species, and all different backgrounds. Puffy fit right in, like a hand in a glove.

All of a sudden, her attention was dragged to a particularly loud argument happening at one of the many stalls.

"Please, I do not understand why you are refusing to sell this to me?" The accent sounded foreign and gruff, and the sentence was unnecessarily convoluted and lengthy. It belonged to a tall, lanky enderman dressed in refined blue garments woven together with silver thread. Purple particles danced around their figure, and their tail whipped nervously out from behind them.

The alchemist crossed his arms in front of his bulky, overweight self, his mean little eyes staring daggers at his customer. "There's nothing that says I can't," he huffed, shoos them away. "We don't serve your kind here."

"Please," the enderfolk pleaded. "My son is not well. Very not well. He needs this."

"And I already told you that I don't give a damn about your hideous children. I don't trust your kind any more."

"I have never met Ranboo. I do not know him. We are not friends. I am not like him."

"They all say that. What are you gonna do, Ender-monster? Distract me with your hypnotic abilities then enderwalk your way away from my stall after stealing that potion?"

"What seems to be the problem, exactly?" Captain Puffy couldn't stand the situation any longer, and finally decided to step in. The two strangers stared at her in shock.

The alchemist was the first to speak. "Step away, missy. This is a private affair."

Puffy was not ready to back down. She looked at the healing potion the enderfolk had been trying to buy, and snatched it up. She slammed a couple of coins down onto the table with such a force that the rest of the wares trembled violently, threatening to tip over and smash onto the floor. "There. Solved." She took great pleasure in seeing the shocked seller stare down at the money, gone out. "Now you don't have to sell it to the 'Ender-monster', right?" Before the merchant could answer back, she turned to the enderman. "Here." She held out the vial to them.

The enderfolk looked stunned at first, but took the vial in their long fingers when Puffy insisted further. Beaming, the captain expected an expression of gratitude, a "thank you", or even just a nod of acknowledgement.

Instead, the enderfolk's face fell, and twisted into a scowl. "You should have stayed out of it, like what he said to you." Before Puffy could reply, he turned around and left, hunched over and with his long fingers protecting the precious medicine now in his possession. The captain's good deed had turned into an inconvenience and a hindrance to someone's life, and her morale plummeted once again.

Everyone was angry, everyone was suspicious, and no one was trusting. She was walking in a horrendous, vicious repetition of history, a nightmare she couldn't seem to wake up from. It was torture.

Ignoring the curses spat her way by the alchemist, she continued on, considerably more defeated and tired than she was before. Thankfully, the market dispersed as she walked, before stopping completely as she crossed into what was once L'Manberg.

L'Manberg...

Sweet L'Manberg.

It was a beautiful tragedy.

It wasn't the first time she had seen the crater since Doomsday, and it was definitely not the last. Was it a little strange that she was mourning a nation she was not even a part of? All she did was help rebuild it. But everyone mourned L'Manberg in one way or another, even if they would never show it. Despite all the controversial leaders and decisions it was responsible for shaping, it was and always would be a beacon of hope, a monument that showed the impossible – independence, freedom, justice – *could* be obtained in the end, and for that the blown up nation would never be forgotten.

She approached the edge of the chasm and looked down. The flagpole down at the bottom was chained down by layers and layers of red tendrils that reached up into the sky, trying to climb their way out. They had been doing so ever since she could remember and thankfully, hadn't made much progress since.

"It's sad, isn't it?" Puffy turned her head as soon as the voice spoke. Purpled strode towards her, his steps hushed and light. A sudden uneasiness took control of her, and she stepped to the side. The bounty hunter looked down into the crater too, clicking his teeth when he saw the tendrils. "These things are popping up everywhere."

"I know," the captain sighed, drawing her gaze back. "It's almost like someone's deliberately planting them."

She knew who, but she wasn't about to accuse certain individuals in front of someone she barely knew. Not only someone, but a kid. A kid she didn't know too well, granted, but another one she didn't want mixed up in any unnecessary arguments or fights. Though, judging by Purpled's reputation, he had already seen his fair share of violence.

"Planting them, you say?" Purpled said. "How weird..." His last sentence was sarcastic, as if he was deliberately playing up the act of surprise. His eyes were a bright violet, thankfully without a trace of red in them, but his stare was sharp. It was the same stare he had given her in the tavern, when Sparklez first arrived a week or so ago. That, coupled with his sudden want to talk to her, made the captain's stomach churn.

"I've never seen you over here," Puffy noted, changing the subject back to L'Manberg.

"Oh, I do come here surprisingly often. Not to look at the view, but only when I'm on the job. This place is teeming with crooks and traitors."

Traitors. "Are you after Ranboo?"

"No. No one has asked me to take care of him yet, so I'm not here for him."

"So what are you doing?"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. "I'm really sorry, Captain." Before she could speak, his netherite sword was drawn from its sheath with a hiss, and was now pressed against her throat. She stumbled backwards with a strangled bleat, and tripped over a rock. The sword was still pressed against her neck, and Purpled loomed over her. "I didn't want to do this."

"What's happening?" Puffy asked, her breathing sharp and quick. "Who sent you?"

"I put it off for as long as I could, I swear." His grip seemed to slack ever so slightly, but before she could take advantage of it, he grasped the hilt harder. "You're dangerous, and I can't let you go free."

"Who sent you, Purpled?" Captain Puffy asked again. "Answer me!"

She crossed her fingers. She hoped that it wasn't someone she knew. She hoped it wasn't Sam, finally and fully corrupted by his duty to the Vault that he paid a hunter to do his own, unfinished dirty work for him. She hoped it wasn't Ranboo, having taken full responsibility for his actions and revelling in them, and who swore to hunt down everyone who turned him away. And what if it was Nikki?

Sweet, sweet Nikki.

What if this was her revenge?

But Purpled's answer was something she certainly didn't expect. "His Majesty the King of the Greater SMP."

She sucked in a breath. Eret? How could...? More importantly, why?

"Please don't make this any harder than it has to be." Purpled was a bounty hunter, and was notorious for getting jobs done quickly and cleanly. He wouldn't complain, no matter how messy the task was, and he was highly sought after for that. Puffy had heard all those rumours, all the awe and the praise surrounding the violet warrior.

But looking up at him right now, all she saw was another kid, wearing armour a size too big for him with a young face twisted by a rage he was trying so hard to keep. The hard stare was broken by flashes of remorse, and the captain started to wonder if all his targets got to see this child for what he really was, and not as a shadow of judgement coming to collect their dues.

"Purpled, you don't have to do this..." About to be murdered or not, Puffy still retained a calm, soothing tone of voice. "You can just walk away from me, and nothing bad has to happen."

"I can't." He stayed as still as a statue, his blade still pressed to her neck.

"If you don't want to kill me, then you don't have to. No one will think any differently of you if you don't."

"They will, but that's not the point. This is my *job*, Captain. I'm paid to get rid of problems like you. I have to do this."

There's a strange moment when someone realizes they're about to die. It's an odd feeling, like a breath you can never quite push out. Puffy could tell right there and then that Purpled's vibrant, haunting eyes would be the last thing she would see in her second life, and perhaps forever. If Purpled was indeed going to do things properly, her last life would be ripped away just as easily. He would be the last memory of a world she loved so much.

That was, of course, if she decided to go without a fight. Captain Puffy had lived through too much to have it taken away from her so suddenly.

Taken by a burst of energy, she kicked. Her hooves were strong, and connected sharply with her attacker. He was kicked right in the stomach, and reeled back with a gasp. The air was knocked out of him, and was replaced by a groan of pain. Careful to avoid the sharp blade of his sword, Captain Puffy turned and ran.

She had no idea where she was going. She just had to get away. Her feet thundered over the ground. Her heart beat faster. Her head pounded. For a while, all she could see was the world whizzing past her in a blur, until she dared to pay closer

attention. She was running away from the Greater SMP, and the remains of L'Manberg were now far behind her. The land around was spiked with the remains of burnt trees, now covered with parasitic ivy and moss. The ground was still dusty and rocky, but nature was starting to take it back as it had L'Manberg.

Soon, the dry thudding was replaced by the snapping of twigs and dried leaves, and the strong winds had softened. The captain continued running. She was starting to tire. She tripped over a rock, and momentarily stopped to regain her balance.

That was a mistake. An arrow immediately whizzed past her ear before hitting a nearby tree. Risking a look behind her, she saw a purple shadow darting between the trees, a bow in his hand and lining up another shot. Purpled was young, but he was quick and agile, and every obstacle in his way was dodged with cat-like ease. All the while, he rained arrow upon arrow down on his target, who thankfully managed to escape them by the skin of her teeth.

Puffy's legs were on fire, and her mind was starting to blur from the lack of air. A stitch had already started to splinter her side, and she realized in horror that she wouldn't be able to go on for much longer. She couldn't stop. A blurry, impaired vision would be nothing compared to a sword through her heart. The landscape had heard her pained plight, and decided to make her decision for her.

In her frantic rush, the captain almost fell over the edge of a cliff. It wasn't an insanely big one, but the jump would have still been enough to shatter both her ankles. She took a brief moment to look around, desperate to find a path down, but there were none. Another arrow sped past her, and she turned around.

Purpled emerged from the canopy of trees, his steps slow and deliberate. His bow creaked as it was pulled back again and he held it at an angle, aiming for her heart. "I told you not to make this any harder than it has to be," he hissed. The remorse in his eyes had disappeared completely, and the child she once saw in him was no more. In his place stood a strong, determined warrior, who would do whatever it took to kill his chosen target.

Captain Puffy saw no other option. She drew out her cutlass after so long, holding the silver, damaged blade up in front of her. It took a hard yank to get it out of its scabbard, and patches of rust had already started growing around the base of the handle. She spread her legs apart, firmly rooting herself into the ground.

Purpled let go of the string.

Puffy brought her weapon down onto the arrow as it sailed towards her, snapping it in two. Another one was fired, and she did the same. Over and over again, shots were fired, and successfully parried by the captain. The bounty hunter forced her back with every twang of his string, until she was barely a foot's length away from the precarious edge. She stood her ground, gripping her weapon tighter as she watched Purpled discard his bow, drawing out his own sword.

"Purpled, just leave," she desperately tried to persuade him again.

The hunter shook his head. "I can't." He lunged.

Purpled's first blow was painfully hard to dodge, and their blades clashed. He was younger, but he had so much more strength than Puffy at that moment. They pushed against each other's weapons, until the sheep decided to duck underneath and headbutt him away. The impact against his netherite chest plate made her head ring, but it was still worth it. The bounty hunter stumbled back, and struggled to stay upright.

Captain Puffy was prepared to run, but her attacker was quick to get back up. Almost as suddenly as he had lost his balance, Purpled brought down his sword for another deathblow. Again, the captain stopped it just in time.

Time dragged on, with both of them struggling to kill, or stay alive. What was Puffy trying to do exactly? She wasn't trying to kill Purpled, that was for sure. She wouldn't have the stomach to do so. And Purpled? Purpled was simply doing his job, and the captain could not fault him for that. That didn't mean she would surrender that easily.

Without even taking a moment to let her catch her breath, Purpled started using new strategies to draw blood. He used the trees to get higher vantage points, or the soft, slippery ground to take a lower approach. Either way, Puffy was ready, foiling each and every one of his attacks.

"Punz was right," Purpled said when their blades crossed again. His face was a hair's length away from hers, soaked with sweat. "You're dangerous."

Captain Puffy spluttered. "Punz? Punz sent you? You said it was Eret!"

"Listen, Eret did, but then—" He interrupted himself. "I don't know why I'm bothering to talk to you."

"Because you don't want to do this." Puffy could feel the strong, netherite blade slowly start to break her own, considerably weaker silver one. She grit her teeth. "You don't want to kill me."

"You don't know what I want," he spat back, and leapt away. "I'm tired of people pretending they do."

Almost as quickly as their conversation had started, it stopped and their fighting resumed. Every step – every leap Purpled took from the trees and every stomp of Puffy's hooves – was heavy and made the ground shake. Throughout the entire ordeal, sweat ran in an odorous, sticky abundance, but not a single drop of blood was spilt.

The earthy ground continued to shake and quake beneath them, acting as the thunder to the lighting clashes of their swords. It was only when they pushed each other away and they briefly paused that they started to realize that the rumbling continued. The world around them trembled. The canopy of leaves above them rustled and stuttered, the tree trunks creaked, and a flock of birds escaped from the forest, soaring high above the clouds. The ground groaned like an unsatisfied, cripple old man, and the faint trembles soon turned into an earthquake.

In unison, both of them dropped their weapons, looking around. Puffy subconsciously grabbed on to the nearest, sturdiest thing she could find: a tree. The ground continued to shake, sending vibrations up her legs. She gripped the bark tighter. "Purpled!"

The bounty hunter was frozen to the spot, his eyes wide and terrified. He gulped, and turned back into the kid he really was. "Puffy!" he yelled over the rumbling. "What's happening?"

"It's alright, there's nothing to be afraid of!" Trying to sound reassuring and calm, the captain held out her hand. "Nothing's going to happen. I'll keep you safe."

From his hesitance to take a single step, Puffy thought he was going to reject her help. In fact, even if he did decide to come over, who was to say that he wasn't going to take the opportunity to stab her in the back, quite literally? At that moment, she couldn't care less. She had no clue what was happening either, but if she could even just gain his trust for a second, she would have done something worthwhile.

Despite her attempts to call to him, it seemed that Purpled had decided to run back the way they had come, leaving his target alone. But like a frightened deer, he hesitated on which way to go, anxiously pacing between the white and black birch

trunks. A cracking sound cut through the air. In the distance, between the shadows of the woods, the trees started to fall like dominoes, swallowed up by the ground. The earth's rumbles increased, and the two fighters watched in horror as a chasm started to open up in front of their very eyes.

Transfixed by the scene, Puffy screamed until her throat couldn't take it anymore. "PURPLED!"

The oncoming carnage seemed to be enough to finally get Purpled to make up his mind. He turned around and ran to her. He stumbled. He tripped over the stray rocks. He scrambled to get to the captain. All the while, Puffy kept her arm out, praying he would make it in time. He *had* to make it in time. At that moment, she was relieved that he could sprint quickly. When he got close enough, he held out his own hand. He was so close to her, so close and ready to grab on.

Their fingers brushed, and the gates of Hell opened up.

Captain Puffy knew the exact moment that Purpled was beyond help from the pure panic in his violet eyes. Wide, pleading, and terrified. A child. His mouth hung open in a silent scream as the ground pulled him down.

"NO!" Puffy leaned forwards, desperate to catch him. The tree she held as her lifebelt bent inwards, and jolted. She lost her grip and her balance. The same frantic flash crossed her own vision, and she plummeted after the kid.

Everything fell by in a flurry of sound and colours. The trees, the stones and the tons of earth tore down the side of the chasm, hacking at everything in their path, from the old, rotting wooden walkways and ladders to the moth-eaten L'Manberg flag draped over a section of the walls. The captain didn't even have the time to process what was happening. Her head hit something hard.

The darkness swallowed her whole.

Everyone for miles around had heard and felt the Pogtopia ravine cave in.

The earthquake had even reached as far as the Egg's cavern, where Punz had been sitting in deep meditation. His trance had been broken almost immediately when the tendrils began to pulse with something other than the Egg's raw power, and he rushed

out to see what was going on. Not many were venturing in the direction of the sounds, and were instead standing around in confusion and sharing concerned whispers.

But Punz was one of the braver – and more curious – souls. He raised his hood over his head, and mounted his horse. With the Egg's reassuring words still vividly playing in his mind, he set off towards L'Manberg. On the way there, he passed by a few other folk who were also gling to check out the strange noises. He paid them no mind. He darted between the walkers, and spurred his steed into a gallop. From the vantage point on the Prime Path, he looked out over the crater with the rest of the crowd. Somewhere behind it, a jagged, dark chasm broke the landscape into two. Punz continued onwards.

A large chunk of the forest had been torn out from the ground, making way for the now overground ravine beneath. Like the winding course of a river, Punz followed the breach. Once or twice, his horse slipped and almost sent them both tumbling over the edge, but quickly managed to right itself and trotted on.

In all his time serving within the realm, Punz had to admit that he had never been to see Pogtopia. Of course, he knew what happened there; the underground revolution had never stayed a well-hidden secret when Schlatt was in power. But he hadn't ever ventured down himself, even when the place was left to rot.

Scattered underneath and upon the fallen debris, relics of a time gone by stared up at the mercenary. Broken lanterns, naked armour stands, a few flags and books. There was even a chest still full of shimmering riches spilled out over the rubble that Punz made a mental note to salvage on his way back.

The Egg chattered away, providing an accurate yet unnecessary commentary to what he was seeing. Punz didn't particularly pay any attention to it, and the voice droned on like a background noise. He kept going and going, scrutinizing the carnage for any sign of what had caused the cave in. Of course, there was always the possibility that it was a natural occurrence after many years of disuse, but the mercenary had a hunch that it wasn't the case. Punz knew he was right. He was always right, but nothing had prepared him for what he was about to see.

Nearing the edge of a cliff, Punz finally saw something other than rubble sprawled out on the floor of the chasm. He edged his horse closer, squinting to get a better look. The moment he saw the edge of a purple cloak, he froze. He blinked, making sure what he was seeing wasn't a mirage, a nightmare conjured up in his mind. It was a nightmare alright, but it was much more real than anything Punz could have ever imagined.

"Oh fuck..." Without wasting a second, he leapt off his steed, and rushed down the side of the ravine. Knife in hand, he kept the blade wedged between the stone and the earth, and slid down as quickly as he could.

The moment his feet touched the floor, he bolted towards the body, his heart hammering against his golden chest plate. For the first time, something was weighing heavier than his armour and his weapons. The Egg's idle droning had turned into excited chatter. It was eager to see what was going on. As Punz drew closer, he realized that his worst fears had come true.

There, surrounded by debris and covered in dust, lay his brother. His head was twisted at an unnatural angle, as was one of his arms. His eyes were open and glassy, the bright violet dulled to a pale shade of lavender. His golden hair was matted by dried sweat and laced with earth.

The mercenary immediately crouched beside him, and started patting his cheek. "Grayson. Can you hear me?" he said gruffly, waiting for the boy to reply. In fact, he *expected* him to obey, and answer his question, just as he had taught him to do. He stayed silent and Punz hit him a little harder. "Grayson. Now."

When still no reply came, Punz began to glance around, searching for any other sign of life save for himself. The chasm was silent. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied a broken cutlass and a torn captain's hat lying to the side, along with traces of blood. There was no body to go along with it.

He raised his head up to the sky, his crimson eyes struggling against the sun's blinding rays. "HELP!" He yelled until his throat was sore. "HELP! IT'S MY BROTHER!"

His plea echoed off the cavernous walls, before being released into the bright, vivid sky above. A moment passed, but no one answered his call. A stray crow hollered from the sky, circling the mercenary and his younger brother.

Punz turned back to Grayson's body, and lifted him up. His head lolled to the side, lifeless. The mercenary shook him. "Purpled." The name his brother had chosen for himself slipped out on its own accord. He didn't stop to correct himself, or even realize. "Purpled, wake up." But the boy *still* insisted on disobeying him.

Punz sank to his knees, still holding onto his little brother's body. He drew his gaze away from the twisted arm and neck, and instead fumbled with his boot. Carefully sliding it off Grayson's foot, he put it aside and started pulling off his sock.

All the while, he held his breath. He didn't know why he was doing this, why he was even checking. What was he expecting to find? What was he expecting to *not* find? When he finally amassed enough courage to risk a look, his stomach sank. Tattooed on the sole of his brother's foot were three hearts.

All three had been lost.

The mercenary lingered over them, tracing each death. Shot, drowned, and now, shattered. When had these deaths happened? What had Purpled got into? What were these clients of his making him do? What were they sending him to get? Who were they making him murder? And most importantly, why wasn't Punz there to prevent any of it?

What had he been doing?

What had he been missing?

Why?

Why...

Pointless wars.

Pointless fights.

Pointless work for pointless pay.

All of it was pointless, and now he knew why.

"Luke, my boy," their father said years and years ago. Punz – or Luke, as he was known back then – was just six years old, and Grayson had just been born. "You have to promise me one thing."

"What is it, Pa?" the young child had asked, the wooden sword he had been thrashing around with drooping at his side.

"You have to promise me you'll look after your brother," Pa told him. "One day, your mother and I might not be here any more, and you'll be alone. You and Grayson will only have each other, and you've got to hang on to yourselves."

Punz, at the time, didn't understand much, or how serious what his father was asking him to do was. He remembered blinking, puzzled. His father had then smiled his

wide, warm grin, and picked him up. Settling him on his lap, he stroked the golden locks on his son's head. "You want to be a knight one day, don't you?"

Punz nodded eagerly.

"Well, consider this your Holy Grail, the most important of missions. Protect your brother."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

Punz had grinned a toothy smile, his two front baby teeth missing due to his rough, violent games. "I promise."

Protecting his brother was his very first of many missions, and it was the only one he had the audacity to fail. The realization took time to sink in and when it had, Punz still didn't react. The first sign of movement was the bowing of his head. The second was his grip tightening around the corpse, as if it was the most precious of treasures.

And it was.

Grayson *was*. He meant more to Punz than all the riches he was paid, all the land he had salvaged and all the blood he had split.

The Egg laughed. The Egg cackled. The Egg mocked Punz in his moment of weakness, of despair. Angrily, he buried his face into his brother's fractured, dead shoulder. A single, sparkling teardrop rolled down Punz's cheek, and fell onto Grayson's cloak.

"You stupid boy," the mercenary muttered. "You stupid, stupid boy..."

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Being Brave

Michelle and the sea were strangers to each other.

It wasn't that Michelle didn't like the water, she just didn't understand it. Her mother said it was dangerous, but how could something so dangerous be so pretty and

enticing? From the windows of her new home, in-between the showers of sparkling white snow, she could see the waves lap against the beach front. They washed up against the rocks, leaving behind silver webs of sea foam that disappeared as soon as she blinked her single eye. The bay was sparkled like shiny gems.

It was beautiful beyond words, and the little piglin didn't have many of them.

When her mother told her fantastical adventures about her time as a sea captain, Michelle understood them, but she never found the words or the courage to ask her burning questions out loud. It wasn't because her mother was scary, or would suppress her confusion. The little one herself was to blame.

The language she was learning was hard, and every word was still punctuated by low grunts and snorts. She just didn't want to talk much. She didn't want to be laughed at. No one would be so cruel, but she didn't know that. Instead, she spent her time wondering. Wondering why, if she loved the ocean so much, was her mother anchored to the land? Why was she so hesitant to let her go down to the bay and play next to the sea?

The closest she had been to the water was on the day the strange, bearded friend of her mother's came off his ship, and a few children from the harbour pulled her off to gaze at the wonders of the piers. They didn't seem to care that she wouldn't talk to them, and were just happy to have a new face to show the world to. No one made any comments about her scuffed appearance. They even gave her a toy ship of her own, that she had since displayed proudly on her windowsill back at home. Sometimes, she found herself wishing she could travel on a real ship someday...

Today was special. Michelle knew that her mother had a lot of things to do and sometimes left her alone, but this time seemed different. Her mother was much sadder than the piglin had ever seen her, and her adoring hug of goodbye lingered for longer than it usually did.

"Be a good girl, alright?" her mother whispered, cupping her daughter's cheek.

Michelle nodded.

"I don't know how long I'll be. If I'm not back by tonight, rest assured that Tubbo will look after you until I return."

The piglin nodded again, then gave her another cuddle. "Bye-bye," she grunted softly.

Well, her mother ended up being right. She hadn't returned that night, or the morning after that either. Michelle didn't worry. She stayed at home, and occupied herself with what she could.

She liked to read, or at least tried to. Words were still hard to understand, so sometimes she would spend hours staring at the same page and the patterns the letters made on it. Occasionally, she would find a book with nice pictures of landscapes or fantastical creatures, and stay glued to those as well, sometimes so long that the morning sun would rise outside her window and she would suddenly realize that she had stared the night away, yet again. So no, she was far from bored.

The first few hours of her mother's absence, she was fine. The next day, however, she was restless. She went down to the beach. The wind was strong and howling, threatening to tip her over with every step, and the pebbles beneath her trotters were slippery. She had no idea how she managed to escape the watchful eye of the rest of Snowchester's inhabitants – who were quite likely going to bring a young tyke like herself home again – but she did, and it felt wonderful.

The patch of coastline she had scampered off to was the one she could see from her window, and it was deserted. Bundled up in the warm, woollen coat her mother had made for her, she braced against the frozen gusts of air. The morning sky was a light, pastel pink, dotted with fluffy clouds and darting gulls.

The sea before her beckoned, and this time, she answered its call.

Her footing became more and more unstable as she got closer to the lapping waves, and she almost fell twice. But the water didn't laugh. It waited patiently until she got back on her feet, and began calling again. The waves washing up against the pebbles hissed and tinkled. Comforting, but above all, intriguing. Michelle carried on forwards, until the water almost reached her feet. She leaned forwards, reaching out to the brine. The sea welcomed her.

"Wait! Stop!" She felt herself being tugged backwards, and she tripped. She landed hard on her back, flinching at the impact. Her frail body stung from the pebbles, and she bit her lip to avoid bursting out into tears.

Someone loomed over her, menacing. Well, as menacing as a small piglin about her own size could be, with a big, wide eye and tusks the size of toothpicks.

"You've got to be careful!" he grunted, his little hands on his hips. "The sea is dangerous!"

Now, she had no idea who this piglin thought he was, but she definitely didn't appreciate the way he had acted so far. She stuck out her tongue, and scrambled to her feet.

The other kid didn't seem impressed. "Don't believe me? Fine." Michelle watched with wide eyes as he marched over to the water, then – briefly glancing back at her – he stuck his hand in. A sharp, sizzling sound filled the air, along with the suffocating smell of burnt pork. Michelle gaped in horror as he withdrew his hand after only a few seconds. His fur turned a dark brown and had clumped together. Some parts had burned off altogether. He smirked at her.

She remained paralysed, horrified by what had just happened.

"It hurts me, so it'll hurt you too." He sounded so confident, but the wobble in his tone and the occasional twitch of his single eye told a whole different story. "Don't trust water."

Well, she certainly wasn't going to after that, was she? The shining ocean now looked dark and foreboding, ready to swallow her whole. She gulped, considering it a stranger once more.

"I'm Michael," the other piglin said, wiping his damaged hand on his coat. He held it out, and pulled her up. Michelle still chose to say nothing, wincing at the coarse texture of the burned fur. "You're Michelle, right? Puffy's kid?"

She nodded.

"You don't talk much," he noted.

Taking the comment as an insult, Michelle glared at him. "And you talk very much." The broken language she was using was noticeable.

"Ah, I get it. You don't like to, do you?"

She shook her head, and questioned the strange pang of gratitude that had hit her. It didn't take a genius to realize that Michael knew exactly why she wouldn't talk, yet he didn't say so out loud. That was, until he spoke again.

"It's fine," he said. "I have trouble as well sometimes, but with a bit of practice, you'll get better." He grinned brightly. "I could help you if you want."

Michelle cocked her head to one side, puzzled. Help?

"My dads have some really funny books we can read," Michael replied. "Or look at. I can teach you to read them!" He sounded excited, and if he was, then she was too.

"MICHAEL! MICHELLE!" a voice suddenly yelled. Turning around, the piglins both watched as a short and lively figure trotted towards them, slipping on the pebbles.

Michael grabbed Michelle's hand, and held it up. "I found her!" he yelled back.

Tubbo had joined them in a matter of minutes after being forced to hobble after a nasty, embarrassing fall both children had the guilty pleasure of witnessing and laughing at. He ruffled both their heads, and sighed. "You have no idea how much I panicked," he said, relieved.

"Daaaad, we're fine," Michael huffed, trying to duck away from the cuddle.

"Tell that to Puffy when I have to explain why her daughter is missing," Tubbo continued to fret, his eyes widening when he saw the piglin's burned hand. "What happened?"

"I was showing Michelle that the sea was dangerous!"

"So you'd stab yourself just to prove a knife is sharp?" Michelle let out a little snort as Michael tried to find an excuse, in vain. Tubbo made her look at him soon after, stern. "This is why you need to stay away from the water."

The little piglin's grin dropped and she nodded, the mere memory of the smell of cooked pork still nauseating.

"Now, kids. Can we please go home?"

Michelle didn't need telling twice. Tubbo wasn't like the other grown-ups in Snowchester; he was short, and had a gentle hold. It was nice to trot along the stones at her own rhythm, instead of rushing to keep up. That didn't mean that Michelle hated being carried by someone bigger than her. On the contrary, she had only experienced it once, but she had loved it.

She looked around them, dearly expecting to see him. *Sam*. The tall man with the soft smile and strong grip she remembered so well. The one she felt safe with. The one her mother spoke so highly of all the time. The one who ended up carrying her out of the dangerous Nether and into Snowchester.

A good friend, that's what he was, or so her mother kept saying. "He's wonderful," she kept telling her daughter whenever the piglin asked about him. "Even when I first met him. Did you know that he wrote me letters when I was first settling into the Greater SMP?"

Well yes, Michelle did. But she always liked the soft glow that lit up her mother's face whenever she'd take out the precious pile of letters, and flick through them.

"He realized that I was having a hard time," she sighed, taking one out from the pile and opening it up. " *'My dear Captain, wear that smile today, it looks good on you. The one you gave me shines just as bright as ever.'* " There was a thick pile of those similar, gentle words, that stayed safely stashed on the highest shelf and bound with a red ribbon.

Michelle certainly didn't understand everything those letters said, but her mother's reactions told her exactly what she couldn't understand. They were beautiful. Sometimes, Michelle felt like there was something more to it all, but Puffy never gave any further hints. Best friends. That's what they probably were.

Sam hadn't turned up in Snowchester for ages. Michelle's hope had started dwindling. Maybe it was all just a dream...

"Michelle! Hurry up!" Michael and Tubbo were already ahead of her by a long shot, and she snapped back to attention.

The piglin turned back to the pretty ocean. The dangerous pretty ocean, she corrected herself, a chill running up her spine. She gave it a solemn goodbye.

The sea waved back.

Captain Puffy had drowned once before.

It wasn't pleasant. In fact, it was atrocious. Her lungs were on fire, and every attempt to scream proved to be futile. It was cold, and it was dark. She had never known what helplessness had felt like until she was thrashing around in the frozen ocean, being dragged down by the one element she considered her best friend. And now she was drowning once again, in a sea of pitch black. There was no light, no sound, and no feeling except for the relentless pounding in her head. It thumped like a drum, echoing and rhythmic. It was torture.

She had no idea how long she had blacked out for once her head hit the rubble, but when she opened her eyes, she was immediately met by a wet cloth dampening her forehead. Automatically, she tried pushing it away, only to have her wrist immobilized.

"Stop moving, you'll make it worse!"

The captain's senses were starting to return slowly but surely, and she could finally take in the world around her. A drop of water from the ceiling landed on the tip of her nose, and the humidity of where she lay suddenly hit her. The scratchy sheets beneath her felt damp. Her muscles ached all over and her head, how her head pounded, threatening to explode.

The hand gripping her arm was soft and fuzzy. She risked a look down. Even her eyeballs seemed to be insistent on inflicting as much pain as they could. The fur was a bright, copper orange, and suddenly he was no stranger to her any more. "Fundy...?" Her reply was weak and she was slurring her words, but he seemed to hear it nonetheless.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it's me."

"I... What... Where...?"

"Shhhh, stop talking." He dabbed the wet cloth against her head again. "Just relax, we can talk later."

The captain had so many questions and wanted so many answers, but Fundy was right. She relaxed. She let him take care of her for a few hours, until she managed to sit up and speak coherently. Fundy, thankfully, let her take as much time as she needed, and made sure to stay gentle with his care. The bandage tied around her head was the first thing she noticed once she had completely regained consciousness. Every time she touched it, she was shot through by agony, and quickly withdrew her fingers. The blood stain on the side was still growing, and the fox insisted that he change it regularly.

The world around her was a damp cavern, with slimy walls and puddles on the floor. It was more accurately a den, although not one that had been lived in too often. From the rubble piling at the entrance, allowing only a couple of rays to filter in, Puffy realized that she was still in the undergrounds of Pogtopia. Or, what used to be underground, until the ceiling caved in.

"You had quite a bad fall," Fundy noted.

The captain raised her eyes from the warm broth she was handed. "I figured." How bad exactly was the question, and she soon found out. Glancing at the underside of her arm, her two remaining hearts had become one. She gulped.

One life left. So, this is what being mortal felt like.

She didn't know how long it would last. "What about Purpled?" The panic in his violet eyes had forever been etched into her mind. Her protective instincts returned once again and momentarily, her own battered state was forgotten. "Is he alright?"

From Fundy's hesitance to reply, she knew the answer wouldn't be good. "He's in a much worse state than you," he said.

Her worry grew. "Where is he?"

"I was going to go back for him once I got you to safety, but Punz came along. I couldn't put you in any more danger than you already were."

"Danger?" Puffy narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean by danger?"

All of a sudden, Fundy went quiet and reserved. Looking down, he fumbled with his hands. "I just know..." he mumbled.

"Did you know Purpled was after me?"

"I... I don't know the whole story!" the fox quickly jumped in. "But I figured that after I talked to Punz about you burning the tendrils, that was the reason behind it, and—"

"*You* told them about me?"

"I'm sorry Puffy! He threatened me, and I blurted it out..." The fox stayed silent for a few moments afterwards, keeping his eyes diverted. "I never meant any of this to happen..." He reached into his pocket, and took out a small, round token. He handed it to Puffy.

The casino chip had a large, red heart on both sides. The captain didn't understand. It looked like a tacky souvenir from Las Nevadas. If that's all it was, Fundy was shallow. Very shallow.

"What is this?" she asked, holding it back out to him.

"A life," Fundy said simply.

Her resentment faded into shock. How was that possible? Was he pulling her leg? "A life? How?"

"It's a long story. I'd prefer not to get into it right now. Please take it. That's all I ask of you."

Captain Puffy looked at it once again. The heart looked like it was pulsing. It looked alive. It looked genuine. She fiddled with it for a while. She knew she should be angry at Fundy for selling her out, but at the same time, she understood. She would have probably done the same thing. All her fury and hate had been used up on the Warden and the prisoner of his Vault. It still hurt, even worse than her head wound did.

Puffy slipped the token back into his hand, closing his fingers around it. "I forgive you," she said softly, watching as Fundy's gaze met her own. "You don't need to buy me off with gifts."

"That's what Quackity always does."

"Perhaps, but it often doesn't work. You don't need to be like him. I forgive *you*."

The fox stared at her, and looked back down to the casino counter in his hand. After a moment of reflection, he pocketed it. "I don't deserve any of your forgiveness," he said. "But thank you."

"Everyone deserves to get another chance."

The fox nodded, his tail waving nervously. Eventually, he spoke again. "I left Las Nevadas," he said.

The captain was surprised. "Really?"

"For the time being," Fundy added. "Think of it as time off from that luxurious life. I realized that I couldn't leave anything here behind, from L'Manberg to Pogtopia." He looked around them. "I still come here often. It's nice to stay in from time to time, alone in the old bunkers. At least, it was until the roof came crashing down."

Puffy looked at him up and down. The suave, expensive suit he had on the last time she saw him was gone, as was the cleanliness of his fur. Instead, he wore his old clothes: the dirty white shirt with the black coat and frayed hat. His fur was back to the mangy state it was during L'Manberg's glory days. It was a huge change, and the old Fundy was

back. Dirty, raw, real Fundy, and not a dressed up, indoctrinated businessman posing as him.

Puffy smiled. "As long as you're happy," she said.

He turned to her, a spark lighting up his eyes. "I am," he replied with a wide smile. His canines shone in the faint lantern light. "I really am. I need to stop being a coward and hiding behind others."

"Brave words, little fox," the sheep smirked.

Fundy briefly swatted at her. "Call me "little" again, and we're going to have some issues!" There was no real anger behind his words, and everything was clearly meant as light-hearted banter. That's all they had for a while.

In fact, it was the only way Captain Puffy managed to stay seated, recovering for a few hours more before finally setting off again. Learning to stand without keeling over again was a challenge, but with thoughts of Michelle and Snowchester filling her mind and Fundy acting as a crutch, she persevered.

Night had fallen when Fundy finally deemed her well enough to travel home. "Please don't exhaust yourself," he begged her.

Puffy drew her eyes away from the night sky. The rocky walls of the Pogtopia ravine were high, and surrounded the stars with a long, jagged frame. The cosmos was a stroke of shimmering paint brushed through the blackness of a dark, desolate canvas. She smiled. "I won't," she assured him. "Thank you for your help. You're very brave."

At her comment, the fox's chest puffed out proudly, and he grinned from pointed ear to pointed ear. "Thank you, and please: if you need anything else, anything at all, just ask me." Fundy had remained the same scruffy, vulpine boy he always had been, but he had also changed in so many ways. His burst of selflessness was one of the biggest ones.

Puffy gave him a nod. "I will Fundy," she promised. "I will." With those final words, she was off.

She was maybe in a *decent* state to travel, but she was certainly not perfectly fit to do so. Her aching, bruised bones and her exhaustion made her feel like she had aged a hundred years in one day. All she wanted to do was sleep. When she came back to

Snowchester, word had already spread about the news on the mainland. It was all drunken, late-night talkers chatted about.

"Did you hear? Pogtopia caved in!"

"Really? After so many years?"

"That's insane, you'd think this was the endgame!"

Captain Puffy kept her hat low over her head, attempting to conceal the bandage. No one stopped her, and that was for the better. When she got home, she was surprised to find two baby piglins and a little lamb snuggled together beside her fireplace, deeply asleep on a couple of shared pillows.

She stared at them for a few minutes, wondering if she should wake them and make her presence known, only to have her heart warmed by the little, sleepy grunt from Micheal and the gentle, unconscious tapping of Tubbo's hooves against the floor. Puffy thought better of it and left them, but not before draping a warm blanket over their huddle. There would be time to talk in the morning.

The captain listened to Fundy's words, and tried to clear her mind. *Don't exhaust yourself even more...* she scolded herself.

She tried to drift off to sleep, calm and composed. She tried so hard, but both the panicked, youthful purple eyes of the hunter set to kill her and the cold, hateful glare of the warden wouldn't let her go without a good cry.

Punz buried Purpled in the dead of night.

He ventured into the deepest, darkest part of the forest, and dug a hole at the foot of an old oak tree. It was almost impossible to see in the low light, but Punz made sure the leafy canopy would still let the starlight bathe his brother's grave. There was no headstone, no flowers, no eulogy of any kind.

Purpled wouldn't have wanted any of that. He would have wanted to be laid to rest in the exact same way he lived: in complete secrecy.

After the work was done, Punz stood there for a moment or two, the pain of his failure still strong and fresh, then left without a second glance. He didn't announce anything to anyone. The chatter in the factions was about anything but Purpled. No one

knew, and no one would. If any potential clients demanded to see him for a business deal or to get updates on their respective missions, they could kindly screw off. Purpled's sudden disappearance would remain a mystery, and that would be that.

There was only one client of his brother's that Punz could not leave hanging.

That was what pushed him to finally cross the drawbridge into Eret's castle, Purpled's netherite sword swinging at his side. The stone structure towered over him, and both his morale and his hood had never been lower. His golden chain and his heart weighed heavy. The Egg's whispers resumed once they saw their beloved crimson growths now covering a decent portion of the castle walls. Everyone Punz came across let him pass, and even the guards at the door didn't stop him. The sight of the mercenary marching in with no requested audience was a common occurrence at the palace. No one questioned it. The king had given him that special permission, just in case something serious was afoot.

The heavy doors banged open, and Punz entered the throne room. His head hung so low that he didn't even see the monarch's face at his intrusion, and even less of him when he dropped to one knee. "Your Majesty," he mumbled.

"Thank you, Sad-ist," Eret said, addressing the other person in the room. "We can continue another time." The portrait artist quickly packed up her easel and paints, and left the two others alone. When the door banged shut again, the king sighed. "Hello, Punz! I didn't expect to see you!" There were loud footsteps as the monarch went to sit on his throne.

Punz couldn't see whether the king had asked him to rise or not, so he stayed down. The only part he glimpsed were the needle-thin heels of the king's knee-high boots.

"I'm assuming that you're bringing news about the mission." King Eret had guessed correctly.

"Yes." Again, short and sharp. That was all Punz made an effort to muster.

"So, you've found the culprit, have you?"

"Yes."

"And?" Eret probed.

"Purpled is no longer a part of the task."

"Oh? Really? How come?"

"He's dead."

Silence fell over the throne room, reaching up into the arches above and whistling through the half open door. The world seemed to come to a standstill, and Punz gladly became a part of it.

After a tense minute or two, Eret burst the bubble by offering meaningless words of comfort. "I... I'm sorry Punz..."

"I never asked for your pity."

"There's a difference between condolences and pity."

Pitiful words, that's all they were to the mercenary. That's what they always were. Pitiful, as were over-the-top eulogies, crowded funerals and colourful flower arrangements. All the memories of pomp and ceremony Punz had once gladly become a part of now soured his mind. Everything was pointless.

"He was killed serving you," Punz said. "I hope you know that." His voice was devoid of any shred of respect. He had lost that long ago.

"And I wish it hadn't happened that way." Again, nothing but empty words spouted out of the king's mouth. Punz just wished he would shut up. "He was a good kid."

"He was a bounty hunter," Punz corrected him harshly, a growl rising at the back of his throat. "And he was a great one."

"Punz, I understand that you're angry—"

"You don't understand anything."

"—but lashing out won't help anyone. It won't bring him back."

"Who said I wanted to bring him back?"

"Who knows, maybe he will come back, like Ghostbur? Or was that a one-time incident... The workings of life after death are too mysterious to know for sure. All I am certain of is that he is at peace, and safe."

"Shut up. Just shut up," Punz spat out, risking a look up.

Eret's face was passive, although his eyes were full of sympathy and sorrow. How dare he? How could he... "Grieving is natural, Punz," he said. "You don't have to pretend to be a tough guy all the time."

"I'm not sad," the mercenary was quick to say. "I'm angry. I'm angry that the target slipped away." He clenched his hand into a tight fist, but not without tugging his hood down again. He had felt it slip, and couldn't have his eyes exposed. Not yet, at least.

"I heard," Eret said.

Punz froze at the monarch's words. "What do you mean, you 'heard'?"

"Well..." King Eret stood from his throne, and walked over to the work desk next to it. As usual, it was covered in plans for the dumb museum he wanted to build, as well as a few other papers about various other matters. Punz watched as he picked up a book on top of all of the mess, already open. He held it up, and Punz had to squint to be able to read the gold lettering on the front.

La Dynastie des Valois

"I'm sure you know that a certain Captain Sparklez recently shipped a sizeable cargo to us from the Old World." No, Punz didn't know, as trade policies were not his strong suit, or within his limited list of interests. "As usual, it included a lot of books. I've been trying to brush up a little on my French, and France's history is truly fascinating."

"That nice, Your Majesty," the mercenary muttered, wanting to get to the point.

Eret stroked the creamy pages. "One figure in particular caught my eye. Catherine of Medici, Italian wife to Henry II of France and one of the most important figures in the House of Valois."

Of course, all this meant nothing to Punz. He had come to bear bad news, not to get enrolled in an impromptu history lesson about a dead, abandoned country he never even wanted to see anyway.

The king sighed. "*Une reine remarquable et une femme intelligente. Un vrai joyau.*"

Punz had only learned English on his own and in stolen books he and his brother nicked off the streets. He wasn't sure if Eret was trying to rub his knowledge of *la langue*

française in his face or not. "I don't see what she has to do with you finding out about the mission."

"Throughout my years as king, I've learned to not put all my eggs in one basket. It seems like I wasn't the only monarch in history who had the same idea, *étrangement*..."

With all these metaphors, history lessons and random French words thrown in for good measure, the mercenary was just as confused as ever. "Explain."

His demand was beyond disrespectful, but Eret had either ignored it on purpose, or hadn't even noticed in the first place. "Catherine had a group of trustworthy ladies-in-waiting called "*L'Escadron Volant*", or "The Flying Squadron". They were sent to woo and gain the trust of the queen's enemies in court so that they would open up and reveal potential, treasonous secrets. They even came with the royals to butter up foreigners during important negotiations."

"They were spies," Punz said, finally understanding. "Why couldn't you have just said that?"

King Eret smirked. "Well, I always find it interesting to know a monarch's mindset in these sorts of situations," he said. "And the history behind these ideas as well."

"They were spies," Punz repeated, letting it sink in. "You sent spies after us."

"Not exactly," the king said, heading back to his throne. "I made my own *escadron*, yes, but I didn't send them after you. When you and your brother went off to investigate by yourselves, I sent them out to start their own inquiry. Spies are very useful, and I'm certain that you – a warfare enthusiast – would know all about that."

Punz was livid, but he couldn't show it. The Egg made him keep his hood low over his eyes. "You didn't trust us." He wanted to take Purpled's netherite sword and plunge it deep into the Eret's chest. "My brother died for this, and you're telling me that it could have been... prevented?"

"I don't know, Punz." King Eret sat back down on his throne. The mercenary could feel his stare. His glare. "Could it have?" The question was icy, and from the tone used, Punz could tell that Eret knew something. Something he wanted Punz to reveal himself, on his own accord.

"I don't know what you mean," he replied quickly. Too quickly.

"My squadron managed to find who really planted those vines outside the palace," Eret said. "And they only needed to interview a single guard. It was the Red Duke, one of the three leaders of the Badlands, *not* Captain Puffy."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Punz replied, clenching his fists. He looked away.

"My sources say you sent your brother after the wrong culprit," the monarch told him. "Now, I could have understood if that was an honest mistake due to lack of clues or misleading witness statements, but my sources also reported that you never interviewed a single soul about the matter."

"Well, your stupid "Flying Squadron" is mistaken."

"No, I don't think they are." Eret's robes rustled as Punz heard him get up, and walk towards him. Every step was slow and deliberate. Eventually, Punz could see the king's boots in his line of vision. He still said nothing. "Puffy is not an enemy of the Greater SMP, and she certainly isn't an Eggpire fanatic. That is common knowledge, Punz, and even you should know that." The mercenary kept his mouth shut. He stayed as still as a statue, and as cold as a block of ice. "I think there's something you're not telling me."

"We tracked the wrong target," Punz muttered. "What more do you want?"

"I want you to look at me."

The Egg began to hum louder in his ears. It always did, but it always gave him clear instructions. Kill him, persuade her, make them obey... He followed them all. However, at that very moment, the Egg's orders were not clear. One moment, he'd hear jeers egging him to obey the king and relish in the horror of his reaction, and another moment, he'd hear yells of refusal which urged him to keep himself hidden. Thus, Punz said nothing.

"Punz. Look at me and tell me the truth." King Eret wouldn't physically make him obey by ripping off his hood and snapping his neck up to him, that the mercenary knew, but his tone was still threatening some sort of consequence for his disobedience. Punz didn't know what it would be. "I am your king."

"I'm a mercenary," Punz snarled. "I bow to no one."

"I think you'll find that you do," the monarch replied without missing a beat, or losing his calm and composed demeanour. "As a mercenary, you obey all authorities you work for, including me. And since you are also living in my realm, I am your

sovereign." Eret was right, and Punz knew it. He just wouldn't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging it. "Punz. I won't ask you again."

If the monarch really wanted to see, then he would be satisfied. Punz didn't have anything to lose by showing the king the infected monster he was employing. Slowly, the mercenary removed the hood of his cloak. Through the few, out-of-place strands of his golden blond hair that fell in front of his face, he could suddenly see so much more of Eret. He raised his gaze.

King Eret took a step back.

A mere glimpse of his ruby red eyes would have been more than enough, but Punz would obey the king to the letter. That was what he wanted, right? He stared into the dark lenses of Eret's glasses, knowing full well that his pearly white eyes were transfixed by the scene. "Puffy wasn't the wrong target. For you, maybe she was, but not for us. I was simply making sure that whatever had to be done was done right, and professionally."

It felt right to finally tell the king everything. His thought process, his reasoning, and his allegiance. He didn't bow to Eret, not any more. He bowed to the Egg, and it had never felt so good to do so until now. The hisses in his head grew louder and louder, chanting his name and praising him. He adored it.

Eret didn't say anything for a long, long time, simply staring down at him. Usually, it was a position of weakness and submission, but today, it made Punz feel powerful. He who had previously been wrapped tightly around the king's finger had now broken loose. But Punz didn't smile.

He *couldn't* smile. "I've spoken nothing but the truth," he said.

King Eret sighed, briefly closing his eyes. "I would bring many consequences down upon you for lying to me, deliberately disrespecting my orders, spreading false accusations and betraying the Greater SMP by helping hide the true culprits." He paused. "But I think the death of your brother due to your own, misplaced actions is punishment enough."

Purpled's death, a punishment. It was, and not even the mercenary's motives could rectify or justify that. But Punz knew that the love he owed to the Egg required sacrifice, and he was prepared to take the pain that followed. "Then, so be it."

King Eret suddenly drew his gem-encrusted sword out from his belt, and pointed it at him. Punz briefly looked from him down to the blade. It was a pathetic attempt at scaring him off. The mercenary scoffed audibly. "Get out of my sight," Eret spat and for the last time, Punz obeyed.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Final Visit

George liked to sleep.

He really did. As soon as his head hit a pillow, he'd be out for the next twelve hours. He was like a lazy feline, preferring to stretch out and relax in the warm sun rather than use his claws to hunt and scratch. Sleeping was a harmless hobby, until it started to get in the way of many, many important events.

During the L'Manberg election all those years ago, when he was pulled in as Quackity's running mate, he slept through the entire thing. Was his mistake the reason behind Schlatt's successful rise to power? Very possibly. When the ram took over and began to install his tyrannical rule, chaos ensued, and the only solution George had to make it disappear was to sleep on it, and through it. He was worse than a bear in the middle of an eternal winter, and many noticed.

"You're late," Sam said when George finally turned up at the gates of Pandora's Vault.

"Sorry." That was all George could really reply. Sam's piercing gaze burned through him and his tired body.

The warden sighed, and rolled his eyes. "It's fine," he muttered. "Come along."

In truth, George had overslept on purpose. In the back of his mind, he wanted Sam to send him away and blame him for his lack of punctuality and respect for the visitation hour they had decided on. There was clearly no way of wriggling out of it, however. If anything, his lateness only made Sam much more eager to drag him into the prison, which is what George was trying desperately to avoid. As he was led through the complex, he started brainstorming, or at least he tried to with his head still heavy from his deep sleep.

Could he run? No. He hadn't the slightest idea of the Vault's layout, and could easily get lost.

Could he annoy Sam enough to kick him out? That was also a no-go. They were good, long-time friends, and it seemed that neither of them would have the heart to purposely inconvenience the other.

After a while of racking his brains, George realized that those were the only two ideas he had managed to think up. They were both doomed to fail, and so he accepted his fate with a heavy heart. One moment, he was walking beside Sam, down the dark, shadowy halls.

The next, he was standing in front of someone he'd never thought he'd see again. The lava popped ominously behind his back, but the small burns he collected were nothing compared to the nauseous, sinking pit in his stomach.

Dream didn't move.

George didn't either.

Both of them stared at each other.

"Hello George," the prisoner said.

George looked away briefly, and raised his hand in a small, awkward wave. "Hi..."

More silence fell between them. A single breath felt like too much to George. He stayed put, avoiding eye contact at all costs.

"Come here." Risking a glance up, he watched as Dream stretched out his arms in an invitation. George hated him. He knew exactly how to make him cave in with a simple gesture, no matter how small it was.

George didn't waltz over to the embrace, or run at full speed to finally reunite with a long lost friend. He was slow. He dragged his feet, and he wrapped his own arms around himself. He looked down. At last, he felt Dream's arms squeeze him tightly, but he stayed as rigid as a plank of wood. The awkwardness between them was apparent, and deeply uncomfortable for both of them. After a few moments, Dream thankfully stepped back, but he kept his hands on the visitor's shoulders.

"Let me have a look at you!" He beamed and patted his hands down George's arms. "You haven't changed in the slightest!"

George didn't know how he should take the comment, so he shrugged. "Well, nothing really happened," he replied, shrugging the prisoner off him. "Since you've been locked up, everything's been fine."

He watched out of the corner of his eye as Dream's grip slackened and dropped. "That's... good. That's great." He was acting all grinning and upbeat, but George knew better.

That didn't mean he wanted to point it out. "Why am I here?" he asked in a mutter.

The prisoner sighed. "Is that the first question?" he tutted. "Honestly, the visitors here have no imagination!" He laughed, and stepped closer. "George, I wanted to see you! I miss—"

"No." George held one of his hands up, palm outstretched towards Dream. The other stopped in his tracks.

"No... what?" Dream questioned.

"Just... no." The visitor wrapped his arms around himself. "I don't want you near me. I don't want you to touch me."

"Are you scared I'm going to hurt you?"

"I don't know any more." George swallowed hard, trembling as a heavy ball of regret was pushed down his throat. "Please. Just don't."

"Alright." Dream held his hands up and took a few steps back, non-threatening.

That didn't help in the slightest. Who was he kidding? Non-threatening? When was Dream ever *not* threatening? "I don't know why I'm here."

"I just wanted to see you, I swear." Pause. "I miss you, George."

"Stop."

"I miss a lot of people. How's Sapnap?"

"Stop."

"And Bad? I heard the Badlands are prospering. He must be pleased."

"Stop."

"What about Alyssa and Callahan? They've been very absent."

"Stop."

"Of course, there must be many stories about Ponk. Still thieving and playing pranks, I suppose?"

"Stop."

"And poor Sam has been really down in the dumps recently. Was he alright when you saw him?"

"STOP!" George clapped his hands over his ears, and screwed his eyes shut. The trembling of his hands tightly blocking his ears conjured a rumbling noise in his brain. He couldn't stand it. He exploded. "SHUT UP! JUST SHUT UP!" After so long, his voice was finally heard, and he yelled. His throat turned raw and scratchy. Was Dream still talking to him? He couldn't hear. All he heard in his own little bubble was himself, screaming and pleading in darkness. The rumbling continued. "I'm sick of all this, Clay! I'M SICK OF IT!" he cried.

A pair of hands gently pulled his hands down from his head, and he dared look up. Dream looked down at him, smiling. George didn't have the strength to push him away. "Sick of what?"

"Sick of you using people! Using *me*!" He tightly balled up his fists, still locked tightly in Dream's clutches. "Especially me! Especially my power—"

"You're king again?"

George froze. "What?" He stared at the prisoner.

Dream's eyes were alight with an emotion George guessed hadn't been there in forever: greed. He freed himself from his shackles; the prisoner's iron grip and hypnotizing, emerald stare. "No, I'm not. You dethroned me, remember?"

"But now you have no obstacles in your way."

"Eret is still the reigning monarch."

The prisoner fell silent, then nodded sombrely. In a sudden change of mood, he turned away and walked to the back of the cell, but not before casting back a look. George couldn't quite describe it. "What have I told you about missing opportunities?"

And what had George said back to Dream's numerous comments and remarks? Nothing. Nothing at all. What had happened to him? What had happened to them both?

George used to be a farmhand back in his teenage years. He'd spend the day sowing and reaping the fields, and the night sleeping soundly on a hay mattress in a barn attic. Thoughts of adventure and becoming a warrior never bothered him. He liked milking cows, and collecting strangely shaped stones once the plough's blades had broken the ground. Life was tranquil, and he was happy. He had a peaceful life, until the young boy with the emerald green eyes and the broad grin started coming.

At first, it was just to steal a few things, from spare, unused scraps of iron to handfuls of carrots. Then, it was to talk to the young farmhand, who had caught the thief multiple times, but never had the heart to tell anyone about him. They were about the same age as each other, and if George was completely honest, these strange appearances were the highlights of his days.

Soon, the simple talks became something more, and they started spending countless hours together, exploring the countryside, rolling down the vibrant green hills and swimming in the cool waters of the lakes.

The other boy was named Clay, and he came from "somewhere", or so he said. He didn't like to talk about his past. His future, on the other hand... George had never met someone so eager to spread their wings.

"Come with me," Clay had suggested to George, inviting him to share the millions of adventures he had planned for himself.

It took a long while, but after multiple rounds of persuasion and drilling the dreams into his mind, George packed up a bag, kissed his mother goodbye, and left his farm.

The road wasn't easy, and there were many aspects of the nomadic and warrior's life that George didn't care for, and some that made him want to turn back. But with Clay by his side, he got through everything, and the two teenagers grew up together. On the road, they also met and befriended another boy, this one with hair the colour of dark coal and who bore flaming powers unlike anything they had ever seen.

Together, they were unstoppable. Their little "dream team" was all they needed. Just three best friends on the road, watching each others' backs and binded by something stronger than all the forces that tried to pull them apart.

Eventually though, they began to tire of the constant fighting and travelling, and chose a nice piece of land to settle down on and build a life. They were soon joined by others, and life was perfect for a while.

George had never expected everything to go downhill so fast. Yet he, Clay and Sapnap stayed as thick as thieves, at least for a while. Power was won and lost, wars were waged and resolved, and nations rose and fell, but still they stuck through it together. L'Manberg's revolution was bloody, and although it ended with a loss, they still wouldn't have traded their fierce camaraderie for the world.

At least, they didn't until Sapnap got into a pet-killing skirmish, which made Clay—sorry, *Dream*, as he now wanted to be known as, fight against him. Then a long time afterwards, George's sudden coronation as King of the Greater SMP and simultaneously just as sudden dethroning was a whole other incident that finally ended breaking them up.

There was still a slight glimmer of hope for a Dream Team reconciliation, but that was quickly crushed by Doomsday, where they stood in L'Manberg's ranks against Dream, Techno and Philza. George and Sapnap stayed loyal to each other and joined Kinoko, and Dream went off. Alone. Corrupted. Greedy. Demented. And still, George could not hate him.

Through the unnerving, smiling mask and the just as static, threatening demeanour Dream became moulded by, George would never forget the handsome, happy golden-haired boy he used to be. The boys *they* used to be, all three of them. Together. Unstoppable.

But that didn't mean that George was happy being with Dream in that cell after over a year of not seeing him. In fact, Dream's offhand comments about his incapacity to claim the throne again suddenly snapped him back to reality. The air was suffocating from the heat of the lava, the humidity of the holding cell's walls, and a sickening odour wafting through the air. George finally found the source; a bunch of flowers. He couldn't tell what they were any more with their blackened stems and petals, rotting away.

He couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand any of this. Perseverance is a key factor in every good warrior, everyone always said. George was done with acting. At heart, he wasn't a warrior. He was just a farm boy who left foolishly to follow his heart, and he was

sick of pretending he was something he was not cut out to be. It was too much. Everything that had been building up finally boiled over.

George chose to flee. He turned to the wall of lava. "SAM!" he yelled.

He could hear Dream's heavy steps as he marched back towards him. "George, what are you doing?"

He refused to look at him, but the genuine worry in the prisoner's voice cut him deep inside. "I'm getting out of here." He yelled again. "SAM, I'M READY TO LEAVE!"

Finally, he heard the creak above him, and the curtain began to fall. He let out a sigh of relief, which then morphed into a squeal as someone grabbed his arm.

"George, please, just a few more minutes," Dream pleaded. George wriggled out of his grasp. "I have something to tell—"

Finally, the curtain cleared, and the warden came back within George's line of view. With a nod, Sam launched the moving bridge again. George didn't need telling twice before he scrambled onto it.

Only then did he turn back to Dream, with a heavy heart and tears in his eyes. The prisoner's expression was scary. It looked real. Real sadness. Real heartbreak. George didn't let it faze him. "I should have never come to see you," he muttered through painfully gritted teeth. "You always ruin everything."

"Karl?"

The Kinoko library remained silent, and still. Pale sunlight filtered through the stained glass windows, casting long shadows on the soft, mushroom walls and the wooden floor. Chests full of books lined the bottom floor, the new shelves they were to lay on still under construction. A few of the covers and pages were singed by crisp black ash. The spiral staircase up to the second floor was also only half finished, and piles of burned planks lay in a forgotten pile under them. Tall bamboo scaffolding stretched up to the ceilings, creating a jungle of thin, spindly legs to navigate through. The stained glass windows were cracked and smashed, but they were most definitely going to be replaced shortly, and the glorious mantle in front of which the Council's meetings were held had already been fixed and reeked of new varnish.

The fire had indeed been devastating, but the rebuilding was coming along nicely.

Thanks to King Eret's generosity, Kinoko Kingdom had begun to regain its former glory. The materials were easy to get, and the gracious volunteers from other factions and neutral parties brought some much needed help when it came to sweeping the streets of the debris or patching up the gaping holes in the walls and roofs.

The only issue that the catastrophe had caused was the rise of a new enemy. Sapnap was still out there, somewhere. Search parties had been sent out as soon as the fire had been tamed, but they all came back empty handed.

The Council was angry, George was worried, and Karl was unreadable. Their leader had since locked himself within the confines of the library, and had barely seen the sunlight since. Business, he claimed, but everyone knew that business matters didn't make people sob as much as the rare glimpses of Karl's puffy red eyes and dark tear tracks down his face showed.

George knew that his timing wasn't the best, and that the leader of Kinoko had much more pressing matters on his hands, but he couldn't wait any longer. "Karl?" he called a second time, looking around. "Are you here?" Everything was still and silent.

He continued on through the scaffolding, peering up the twisting staircase to the floors above. He made a move to start up them, when something large and gaping caught his eye. Tucked away at the foot of the stairs, hidden from view by the shadows, lay a square hole in the floor. The trapdoor that covered its entrance had been thrown wide open, and a flickering orange light emitted from within.

George, at first, was tempted to ignore it and continue on his way, but his curiosity soon got the better of him, and the search for Karl was quickly forgotten.

The library wasn't somewhere he explored often. He was a part of the Council, sure, but aside from meetings, he never had a reason to spend time there. Books weren't his thing, and neither was studying. His home town's only teacher would likely and happily confirm that fact. He didn't know whether this trapdoor was off limits or not, but the invitation to nose around was too intriguing to ignore. Heaving himself through the opening, George stepped down the ladder, almost slipping down the wooden rungs. It wasn't a long way down, but he definitely preferred to be safe than sorry. Once his feet hit the floor, he turned around.

The trapdoor and the ladder lead down to a narrow space underneath the library, crammed with just as many books as the shelves above ground. They lay in messy piles all over the floor, papers scattered between their pages and on top of their covers. Leather volumes lay open on the few tables and workspaces, their contents spouting

gibberish and languages George could not understand even if he tried. The walls, made up of wooden planks, were covered in loose papers, maps and sketches drawn onto thick, crinkly yellow parchment. The whole place emanated with the musty smells of times long gone. A golden, glowing lantern swung from the ceiling, casting wide circles of light over everything it illuminated.

George was transfixed by the scene, and ventured further into the hole. It was strangely cosy, and enticed him to explore further. He peered at the walls, trying to make sense of all the scribbles and other objects around him. There was no pattern to these strange artefacts.

On one of the larger sheets of parchment, a layout for a strange city was drawn on in dark blue ink, with a surprising amount of detail added in for good measure. Labelled "Mizu", all the rooms were connected by a knotted maze of long hallways and secret passages. The drawing next to it was of a Roman-like coliseum, brimming with ceremonial decorations and frantic crowds.

In another corner of the room, a purple and green butterfly mask hung from the wall. It bore a striking resemblance to those worn in the masquerades of olden, forgotten times, where the rich and noble aristocrats dined and amused themselves in complete luxury at the expense of the penniless, starving lower-class who mindlessly plowed the fields and wished for revolution.

George's eyes were finally drawn to the easel standing against the back wall. A huge, vertical canvas sat snugly against it, towering over a stain-splattered stool on which a palette of greasy oil paints had been left. Paintbrushes soaked in the murky water of a dirty glass jar, balanced precariously on the edge of a table. He moved closer, squinting at the piece of artwork.

Every stroke was soft, and not a line seemed to be out of place. The branches of the oversized birch tree in the middle twisted and turned around the canvas. Their dainty tips were graced with light, white and pastel pink leaves suspended in mid air in their gentle fall down to the floor. The arched walls around the tree, as well as the myriad of castle towers rising in the background, were all of a pearly white, pristine and clean.

It was beautiful, there was no denying it. Whimsical, and magical, but everything on the canvas gave off an air of uncertainty, and dread. The shadows under the arches and the small windows in the towers seemed to be hiding invisible figures he couldn't see. He felt like he was being watched. The painting was watching him.

"George?"

He turned around abruptly at the call of his name. Karl was hanging halfway down the ladder, a book clasped within his grasp.

The Inbetween: Fact or Fiction?

Immediately, he composed himself, taking a clear step away from the picture and washing away the frightening thoughts that had consumed his mind.

Karl snapped the book in his hand shut. George couldn't hope noticing that he looked remarkably relaxed and calm, one might even say serene. Any and all formality he held during the Council meetings had been erased, and the competent leader had been replaced by a young, cultured young man stripped of his ceremonial, colourful silk robes and now stood before him in nothing but a baggy and pale linen shirt tucked into tight, waist-high trousers. The only part of him that never seemed to change was his grey eyes, as old and mysterious as history itself. "What are you doing down here?" Karl didn't sound angry. His tone was decidedly curious.

George was about to answer his question truthfully, when he remembered why he was looking for him in the first place. "Karl, where's my army?"

"Your... what?" Karl furrowed his brow, and came towards George. He laid his book beside all the others. "What are you talking about?"

"My army. You promised that when I joined Kinoko, I'd have an army strong enough to storm Eret's castle and get my throne back." George's tone was harsh, and he was well aware of that fact. He hid behind it. A proof of capability was key in his attempt to sway the leader's decision.

But Karl was clearly having none of that. "Take down Eret?" he said, aghast. "After everything he's done for us?"

Everything he's done. Strong words, a poor argument. Fine, he helped rebuild Kinoko Kingdom and provided the much needed materials. Big deal.

George nodded without a shred of remorse. "Yes, I want to take down Eret. That was the only reason I joined, and why Sapnap came with me." He clenched his hands, his knuckles turning white. "The throne was ripped away from me, and I want it back."

"George, you were king for such a short time, why—"

"It doesn't matter," he interrupted, spiteful. "I'm a better monarch than Eret will ever be, and this time, I'll wield the power to prove it!" He looked away, feeling Karl's judgmental gaze linger on him along with the invisible ones of the painting behind him. Even the books and the items seemed to hold their breath, waiting eagerly to see what would happen next.

"George, what's up?" Karl asked, finally breaking the silence that had drifted down between them. "This is the first time you've brought your dethroning up in ages."

He shrugged sharply. "Well, maybe I'm just tired of waiting!"

"Says the man who sleeps most of the time," Karl said, letting out a small, lighthearted chuckle. George heard his footsteps kick a few stray papers as he walked over, yet still he refused to look at him. "That's not it. I know it isn't. What happened?" Karl's hand on his arm did nothing to help the situation, or make him want to open up about anything.

"Nothing," George replied, with much less conviction than before.

"You know you can talk to me. I'll listen." The leader of Kinoko was certainly insistent, and was so close to getting the key.

George still kept the door locked. "You wouldn't understand."

His friend squeezed his arm. "Try me."

George looked up. Karl's eyes stared back, just as calm and warm as they always were. They were always so strange to George. Every time he'd cross that gaze, he'd feel like he was looking at a brother, a father, a friend and a grandfather at the same time. It was an unsettling feeling, but in a nice way he couldn't comprehend. And maybe, just maybe, Karl was right.

Maybe he *could* understand.

He opened his mouth. "Have you ever had someone you loved be locked up somewhere no one can get to," he began, attempting to be as vague as possible. "And the only way you feel like you can save yourself from a heartbreak is to get him out of there?"

Karl's grip on him tightened. "Did you visit Pandora's Vault?" he asked.

George bowed his head. "Yes."

"Oh, George..." Before he knew it, George was being drawn into a soft, tender embrace. Karl's arms bore no weight around him, and he felt like he was being touched by an angel. He sunk into it, his gaze growing misty. The world around him faded away, and all he stayed aware of was the golden light hanging over them, circling Karl's dusty brown hair with a gentle aura.

"I need my throne back to get him out of there," George muttered. "I want to get him out of there. I'd rather see him lying dead in front of me than rotting away, alone. I'd rather kill him myself. Why did no one execute him when they could?"

"Don't say that, you don't mean it."

George didn't know if he did or not, and he didn't want to know either. "Is... Is getting over someone you've lost hard to do?" he asked in a shaky voice.

Karl's reply was sullen, and gentle. The sorrow he tried to suppress was audible in his tone, and guilt gnawed at George. "Ask anyone," he said. "Ask Sam, ask Philza, ask me. Everyone will tell you the same thing. It never stops stinging, I'm sorry." He pulled away, and George closed his eyes as he brushed his thumb over his cheek. George hadn't even noticed he had let it slip out. Karl was right. It did sting. "But you haven't lost Dream yet. He's still alive, and I'm certain he still cares for you."

George's tone darkened, Dream's words from the Vault still fresh in his mind. "He'd care for me much more if I was king again."

"And that's why I will instruct the Council to refuse your demand if you decide to appeal to them. You don't need power to be loved, George. Everyone likes you as you are."

"Everyone except the only one who matters."

"Then Dream is shallow, and he doesn't deserve you."

George didn't agree with Karl's final statement. He didn't want to agree. He wiped the rest of the small tears trickling down his face. "I can take care of myself," he said.

"I know you can," Karl smiled at him, his saddened gaze turning even sadder. He seemed to accept that his words held little to no weight on his thoughts, and George was fine with that.

When his cheeks were finally smeared and his eyes had stopped crying, George looked around the messy room again. "What is this place?" he asked.

"A place you were not meant to find," Karl said back. George soon found himself being guided back towards the ladder. "I'd prefer not to say. Please try not to tell anyone about it."

George frowned, not expecting the answer he got. "I won't," he agreed. "But next time, maybe keep the trapdoor closed."

"Of course. That was my own fault." Even after stumbling into Karl's "lair" as an unwanted visitor and spewing out all his emotions, George was surprised by Karl's gentleness and soft manners. There was no shouting, or physical violence, or spite. The only thing that came out were harsh truths.

"Karl?" He turned around just before he climbed up the ladder again.

His friend was busy clearing up some of the musty books on the desk. He stopped and looked around. "Yes, George?"

"I was wondering if... Well..." How was he supposed to ask this without offending both of them? "We've had a crap few weeks, and months. How about we go fishing later, just the two of us?"

"And feel free to sing corny love songs, cry, and then blame it on the fact we haven't caught anything?" Karl snapped a book shut, eyes sparkling with amusement. "I can work with that. Let's go!"

George couldn't help but beam at the answer he got, and he relaxed. "You mean it?"

Karl laughed. "Of course! I haven't taken a break in so long, and the lake should be brimming with carpe!"

The brief optimism they both seemed to share in that moment was a nice change from their recent pessimism regarding their respective situations. George waited until Karl had finished what he needed to do before joining him at the bottom of the ladder. George continued to climb the rungs, when he heard a crash behind him. Abruptly, he snapped his neck around, and watched in terror as Karl collapsed to the floor.

"Karl?" he cried, jumping down from his perch. The impact was sharp, and his ankle buckled under him.

At first, he thought he had simply tripped over one of the numerous piles of mess, but he soon realized that it was something much more serious. Karl was on his knees, squeezing his head between his hands and writhing around. His groans grew impossibly louder, until they morphed into screams. George was terrified by what was happening, and his inability to help in any way scared him even more. He dropped to his own knees, facing his friend.

"Karl, answer me!" he yelled, taking a hold of his arms and attempting to pry them down. "What's happening? KARL!"

Almost as soon as he yelled his name, Karl stopped. Something had switched. George stared into his eyes, and the Universe stared back.

From the stars in the night sky to thousands of years worth of forgotten history, George saw it all. All the pain, the wars and the suffering, but also the irrepressible joy, hope, and love that could both start and end worlds. It was too much. All the truths no one would ever know, all the pain no one would ever feel, all the secrets never whispered, all the enlightenment that would never be passed down. All of these were held in the eyes of one, young man who George now knew bore the entire world on his shoulders. But he couldn't bear to be a part of that.

He backed away, but Karl clung on to him with all his might. His nails dug deeply into George's arms. "You might not need your own army to get Dream out..."

George froze, letting the shackles of Karl's fingers and what he said sink in. "What?"

Karl's eyes were still trained on him. They looked old, and young at the same time. He continued to grip him like a lifebelt. "Pandora's Box..." he said. "The Vault will open..."

Prophecies, or visions – or whatever shred of foreshadowing Karl had seen – were always blown out of proportion. They were nothing but riddles and rhymes needing intense scrutiny to decipher, and even then would still baffle many. But this one was clear as day, and George was not dumb. He knew what Karl was saying.

That didn't mean he had to believe it. "There's no way!" he exclaimed, his heart pounding. In fear or in anticipation, he didn't know. "Sam said–"

"Dream will escape, George." Karl's tone was calm, albeit a little shaky.

George ripped his arms out of his friend's grasp, and stood up. "Then we need to warn the Warden!" He ran towards the ladder, only for Karl to shoot up and hold him back.

"No," he said. "We'll stay in Kinoko. Go fishing. Pretend I never said anything."

"But—"

"Trust me George. You don't want to try and prevent history that's already under way."

Though it may have been strange, George had an inkling that the warning was coming from someone who knew exactly what he was talking about.

When Pandora's Vault was first being thought up and built, Dream and Sam had multiple, secret meetings to discuss both the blueprints and the future security protocols. Although Dream knew Sam was more than capable of dealing with everything on his own, it was Dream's commission. He wanted to be involved with his creation.

"I've had a couple of ideas regarding the food," Sam said one day, taking out one of his many notebooks.

Dream perked up, interested. "I'm listening."

Sam began to read. "Well, a healthy diet is important, so I was thinking some meat, maybe steak, and—"

Dream raised his hand to stop him. "Meat gives you strength," he said. "Feed them potatoes." He remembered watching as the engineer's expression changed from surprised to puzzled. "Is there a problem, Sam?"

Sam paused, then shook his head. He crossed out the entire page, and flipped to a new one. "No, all good..." He began to write. "Baked potatoes—"

"Raw."

"Raw? I don't—"

"Why should dangerous prisoners live in luxury?"

"But... raw? They're not cattle, or swine, or—"

"It may sound inhumane, but it's one less security risk to worry about. Give them raw potatoes."

Finally, after another conversation or two, Sam agreed to Dream's proposition, and raw spuds were officially implemented as the prisoners' breakfasts, lunches and dinners. At the time, Dream was more than satisfied with that decision, and the small victory over Sam he had won in the process.

Of course, that was before he was thrown inside the Vault himself, and was subjected to the living conditions he insisted were necessary for the safety of everyone involved. It was a bitter taste of his own medicine, but Dream being Dream, he adapted to his new environment with a painted smile on his face. After a few rounds of trial and error, he found out how to cook the raw potatoes to his liking by the light of the lava. He ended up enjoying the small amount of freedom he was given.

Turns out, raw potatoes were a much more useful asset than he had first thought.

The dispenser in the corner of the cell creaked, and Dream turned its way. He wasted no time in getting up and going to stand underneath it. A moment or two later, three raw potatoes fell from the ceiling, and the prisoner caught them deftly. He was so used to the mundane routine by now, and his movements were like clockwork. But today was different.

Today, he was so much more eager than before.

Since Puffy's visit, the warden had been spending a lot more time in the holding cell, talking to the prisoner and playing games with him. They opened up a lot to one another, or rather, Sam did. Dream was a good liar, and only confessed to mundane, ordinary dilemmas like boredom. Once Sam and him had packed up one of the many games of cards they were playing earlier that same day, the warden told him his request to Technoblade had been heard.

"Your next meals will be provided by the Antarctic Commune instead of Snowchester," he told him. "Techno sent over the first sack of potatoes."

Dream nodded, satisfied. "And still no meat, I assume?"

"Meat gives you strength," was all Sam had replied, echoing a line spoken long ago. The grin Dream gave him then was forced.

In truth, Dream didn't give a damn about the food. He didn't care whether the spuds he was getting were mouldy or not, or sprayed with a protective layer of toxic repellants. He cared about something much more useful to him.

He just hoped his ticket out hadn't chickened out at the last moment.

Carrying his dinner over to the lava wall, he set the potatoes down and started checking them over. The first two had nothing remarkable on their rough, bumpy skin, but the third was marked with a small cross. His eyes lit up. He fiddled with the potato, until he found a small hole in one of the sides. It hadn't been closed entirely but still enough to hide it from any detection, not that Sam would be patting down the potatoes anyway.

The raw food was the only thing that was never subjected to any security checks, and the fact that this batch came to him intact showed that fact perfectly.

Dream dug his fingers into the hole, and started ripping the potato apart. It was a difficult task, but one that was ultimately fulfilling in the end. In the middle, he found a long glass vial. It was corked at the end and sparkling magenta liquid sloshed around inside.

Dream picked up the small bottle between his fingers, and held it up to the light of the lava. It grew warm in his touch. He smiled. He grinned. Oh, how he grinned! After so long, it was a genuine one, and it stretched his skin. His cheeks were sore. It was wonderful.

"Technoblade, you clever son of a bitch," he chuckled, pocketing the strength potion. Sure, he was complimenting the warrior who saved him, but he knew deep down who the real genius in the situation was.

Dream had to admit that he was wrong in one regard. Steak wasn't the only food that could give you strength. Still riding his elated high, he took a big bite out of his food. Even raw, it tasted amazing, and organic. Nothing like the bitter, toxic ones from Snowchester. That made him grin even more than he would have ever thought possible. His laugh grew louder, his mouth still full.

Two for the price of one. Favours were wonderful things.

Chapter Forty: Revival

"Tommy, do you trust me?"

It was an odd question. An *extremely* odd question. The phantom glanced around, before turning back to Clay. He nodded. Of course he did. Why wouldn't he?

A flash of relief crossed his friend's gaze, and he smiled. "Thank goodness... This will make it so much easier..."

Easier to do what exactly, Tommy didn't know.

When Tommy went into the cell that day, he knew it felt... different. His roses were no longer there, for one thing, and maybe that was for the better. The stuffiness he first felt when entering the warm, dark room had since dissipated, and it had never felt so airy. Clay too seemed in much more mellow mood, and had told Tommy to stay in with him.

The phantom had no idea why. He obeyed, albeit reluctantly, but nothing had happened. It was just an endless period of time where Clay switched from smiling at him to staring sternly at the lava curtain. It was almost like he was waiting for something. It had been going on for hours, and Clay only fully turned to him when an ominous creak was heard overhead.

That was where they were now, staring at each other, Tommy's burning questions still bubbling around in his brain.

"I've told you many stories, haven't I Tommy?" Clay said.

The boy nodded vigorously. Of course he had, and they were all wonderful! His thoughtless sleeps has turned into vivid, dream-filled slumbers, rich with adventure and sweet aromas – that although Tommy could not smell, he still knew they were there. Losing himself in his imagination, fuelled by the tales he was fed, was like resting in a field of soft, silky grass, watched over by the busy bees buzzing with secrets they were so eager to tell him. Why had no one ever told him how wonderful storytelling could be?

"I may have glorified a few details."

Well, that didn't matter much to Tommy. The bigger, the better. That's what mattered in the end, right? Isn't that what people said?

But from his friend's expression, there was nothing good about his confession. "Stop smiling," Clay ordered, his voice harsh and cold. The ghost was taken aback, and quickly let his face fall. "There's nothing good about lying to a friend."

Lying? Clay, a liar? The phantom tilted his head to one side, puzzled. What did he mean?

"I've been keeping something from you Tommy, and it's something I think you have the right to know about."

The ghost continued to blink up at him, patient. An impatient part of him wished that Clay would stop acting like such a cryptic, and just spat out what he had to say. He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"You're impatient," his friend noted.

The ghost nodded eagerly.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sure you're ready to hear this."

I am! Tommy yelled, his words never leaving his own mind. He could only nod and shake his head. His throat was keeping him captive, yet again.

Clay took a step back, his eyes looking the phantom up and down. The boy stood up straight, taking a confident stance that showed he was much stronger than his friend thought. "It's about Tubbo."

Tommy tilted his head, decidedly curious. Tubbo? Why did Clay not think he was ready to hear what he had to say? He was always ready to hear about Tubbo. In fact, he probably knew his entire life like the back of his bruised, ghostly hand.

"I've been hiding a few things," Clay said.

Tommy shrugged. That was fine with him. He was always ready to learn more.

"About you and him."

That was even better!

"And how he betrayed you and left you to die."

The phantom froze, shocked. *Betrayed? Left...to die...?* What was he talking about?

He stared at Clay, awaiting an answer, or a sympathetic gaze. He only received one of the two in return. "I didn't want to talk too much about you Tommy, because I know how much you like Tubbo. I didn't want to break that." Something told the ghost that his friend wasn't telling him everything, but he didn't know why. He listened carefully. "Tubbo exiled you a long time ago, and left you to rot on a faraway shore. I was your only friend. Tubbo didn't care. You went back to him, and you forced him to let you back into L'Manberg. He did, and backstabbed you later on, leaving you to die again, in here this time." Clay gestured to the room around them. "He didn't care about you, Tommy. I thought it was time you finally knew that."

If Clay was expecting an answer, he'd be sorely disappointed. Tommy stayed frozen to the spot. He was trying to process what he had just been told. He tried so hard to— in fact he prayed that he had misheard somehow. Unfortunately, he heard it loud and clear.

Tubbo seemed so sweet, how could he be a... a...

"He was a lot more monstrous than you'd think," Clay said, almost reading Tommy's mind. "Well, considering who his father was, it shouldn't have really come as a surprise."

Tommy didn't know what he meant, and he honestly didn't want to. He didn't know why the revelation hurt so much; he had only seen Tubbo once. Perhaps it was because it tore apart the heroic image he had in mind, based solely on the stories Clay told him.

"Glorifying things can be a bit of a painful thing sometimes."

Tommy couldn't help but agree. The hero in his mind turned into a villain, and a rage began to boil within him.

"Sam!" Clay suddenly cried out.

Tommy froze and turned around. The warden had walked into the cell, his golden armour just as shining as ever. The ghost stepped back, ready to retreat back into his dark corner. This time, Clay grabbed his wrist. His hold was rough and strong, and the

boy tried to squirm out of it. His friend was stronger, and yanked him towards the newcomer.

"I don't believe Phantommy and you ever had the pleasure of meeting, have you?"

The phantom's stomach dropped even further than it already had, and he stopped struggling. Nervously, he looked up.

Sam looked around for a few moments, frowning. Clay pulled his attention back to them both. "You've got to look closely," he told him in a sing-song tone. It was like he was coaching a young child, which Tommy knew for a fact that Sam was not.

The boy swallowed hard as Sam's eyes narrowed in a squint, peering straight through him. A second or two later, his eyebrows raised, and he stumbled backwards. "T...Tommy...?" he croaked. His voice was no higher than a feeble whisper, hoarse and trembling.

Tommy was seen, yet again. He should be happy. Why did he feel sick? After so long, the red spirals and blotches began to circle back into his vision, and he held his head. He sank to his knees and closed his eyes. He began to count.

One... two... three... four...

He heard someone call his name, but he didn't respond.

Five... six... seven... eight... nine...

"Tommy...?" The voice was closer.

Ten...

A pair of hands suddenly held him. "Tommy, are you alright?" The boy opened his eyes and found himself staring into a pair of black and green ones.

Sam's grip was gentle, much gentler than the way Clay usually clutched him. Through the thick gloves that covered his hands, Tommy could feel the softness unlike anything he had ever felt before, and a warmth he could not explain. It was just like the lava, and he wanted to sink into the touch in the exact same way.

The ghost answered Sam's question, and nodded. The warden inhaled sharply, and let out a shaky breath. His grip tightened, but not enough to hurt the boy. It still stayed soft and comfortable. Subconsciously, Tommy leaned into it. He didn't even have the

time to process what happened, when Sam suddenly pulled him into his arms. Tommy found himself with his head pressed against the golden shoulder guard, although he felt nothing substantial at the contact. But what he did feel was a whirlwind of emotions.

The first time he saw Sam, he tried to call him and get his help. The moment he touched him, however, he was driven back by a ferocious rampage of sorrow, regret and despair. All of those drowned him on the spot, consuming him and making him want to scream.

Those emotions were still there now, although they were dulled by something else Tommy had never encountered before. The only way he could describe it was... pure. Unfiltered. Sickly sweet. Consuming. Wonderful. In a matter of minutes, everything was forgotten, from the boy's aching body to his anxiety regarding... well... everything. He closed his eyes, and slipped under the spell.

"I'm sorry," Sam muttered somewhere beside his ear, squeezing his see-through body. "I'm so sorry for everything..."

Sorry for what? Why was Sam sorry? Tommy didn't know, but he couldn't hate him even if he did. How could he hate the one who bore the most fantastical, unknown feeling to him? How could he?

"Both of you, up." Clay's bitter tone was back, waking the phantom from his trance. He didn't want to. He didn't want to listen and part from this strange, pastel pink sensation warming him inside and out. Defiant, he pressed against the warden, and tried to zone off again.

Sam's arms helped him rise to his feet, and then let go of him. The phantom looked up, perplexed. He tried to cling on, his weak fingers snatching the fabric of the warden's cloak. He lay his head against the golden chest plate, trying to soak up every last drop of that beautiful feeling. It was addictive and he wanted more.

A rough finger tapped his arm, and Clay pulled him away. When Tommy finally let go, he was aware once more of the dark, gloomy cell, and a new weight settled itself around his shoulders. He tried to reach for Sam again, but Clay stepped in between them. "There will be time for all that later," he said, with an expression Tommy could not decipher.

His gaze turned back to the warden, pleading. Sam stared back, and Tommy saw his arm move. He clearly wanted to bring him back into his arms, but ended up resisting,

instead wrapping his fist around his trident. "He's right," he told him. "There'll be time afterwards."

Afterwards? After what?

He looked at Clay for an explanation. What was going on? Why was he suddenly allowed to interact with Sam? Why did Clay seem so on edge?

"You haven't told him?" the warden asked, turning to Clay.

"No, why would I?"

"Well... He does have a choice in the matter after all."

"Is this about Puffy? What did she say to you?"

"Nothing." Sam suddenly straightened his back, and held his head up. Rigid, he cleared his throat. "But Tommy does have a right to choose."

"Fine." Clay huffed, and turned back to the ghost. "Tommy, would you like to be revived?"

Revived.

The boy held his breath. Revived. It was a word he didn't recognize at first, but one that sunk in quickly. Soon enough, he understood, the realization trickling over his body like a waterfall. Revived. He looked down at his pale, see-through fingers, and the bloody bruises on himself. He gently touched his sore throat, and followed the red spots as they waltzed across his vision. He looked up at Sam.

When Clay asked the daunting question, the warden had remained silent, but softened his stance. His gaze was kind, and again, Tommy was drawn in by the emotion he couldn't comprehend. "It's your choice," he said. His smile was warm and reassuring.

"But you need to make up your mind," Clay interrupted harshly, impatiently tapping his foot.

The warden glared at him. "Let him take his time."

Tommy's friend snapped back at Sam. "And what if we don't *have* time, Sam?"

"Why, do you have somewhere to be?"

The two men squared up to each other, one clearly taller and stronger but Clay's piercing stare and pursed lips more than made up for his smaller size. If Tommy didn't react right away, he felt like he'd witness a scene that would scar him for the rest of his death, however long that may be.

He stepped in front of Sam, staring at Clay. His damaged hands were curled into feeble balls, and he opened his mouth. "Yes."

Speaking was the worst decision he could have ever made, and his determined stance soon turned into him bent over and spluttering as his throat splintered. Immediately, a pair of hands shot out to steady him, but he tried to push them off.

"Tommy, breathe..." He tried, he really did, but all he could do was choke. Sam's arms were back around him, steadying him as he crumbled. "Dream, please! Just do it! Bring him back!" The plea was loud. The boy had never heard someone beg as hard and as desperately as Sam had, and it was scary.

Tommy was shaken by bouts of coughing over, and over, and over again. His throat was on fire, burning him from the inside out. It was unbearable. He wanted it to stop, he wanted to be fixed.

He wanted to be brought back to who he used to be, whoever that was.

He expected Clay to react immediately, but to his surprise, he didn't. The man stood perfectly still, watching the scene from afar with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He looked bored. All of a sudden, Tommy felt much safer in Sam's protection, being held up and cared for. Despite Sam breaking his compass, then taking his discs, and then quite possibly being the one who let him die in the first place, he felt much happier with him than with Clay. He began to regret the flowers he sent.

Or maybe that was just his childish mind talking. Clay had switched personalities as soon as Sam had walked into the cell. There was probably a good reason that had nothing to do with Tommy. His resentment turned into sour guilt as his unfounded accusation. His spluttering stopped, and he regained his balance. Sam's hand lingered on his arm, comforting and delicate.

"Fine." Clay finally stepped towards them, and rubbed his hands together. "Are you sure?"

This time, the warden answered for him, and the phantom was thankful. "Yes." They shared a small look. "We're ready."

Clay nodded slowly. "Tommy, come over here." He held out his arm.

Tommy immediately looked at Sam, almost asking for permission. If he really was or not, it was still given in the form of a light squeeze on his arm and the warden guiding him a few steps forward. The boy then walked the rest of the way himself. When Clay's clammy hand touched his, Tommy had the strong urge to recoil. His grip was rough again, and hurt him a great deal. He bit his lip to stop himself from crying out.

"Now, you need to listen carefully," he began, staring into his eyes. "Do you understand?"

Tommy swiftly nodded.

"Good. The revival process has been used only a handful of times, and I can now admit that I have never done it before."

The ghost felt a shiver run up his spine. He gulped. He looked around for reassurance. Sam hadn't moved from his spot, but the worry that flashed across his eyes was unmistakable, even to him.

"I thought I told you to listen to me." Tommy turned back obediently. "You are going to have to follow my instructions to the letter. Now, stand here."

The boy moved to the exact spot Clay pointed out, and waited patiently. He watched as his friend walked a couple of circles around him, before standing beside Sam.

"Good," he grinned, his shoulders relaxing. Finally, the old Clay had resurfaced, and Tommy felt so much safer. "This might be easy after all." He paused. "There's... only one thing."

"What?" Sam asked, concerned.

What? Tommy questioned silently at the exact same time.

"There's always a price to pay in these situations," Clay continued, only to be cut off by the warden.

"I gave you everything you asked for, what more could you—"

"This has nothing to do with me, Sam. I'm not as selfish as you think. Tommy needs a life."

"A life?"

"How else is someone supposed to come back?"

"How am I supposed to know? You're the one with the book."

Tommy panned from one man to the other as they retorted back and forth, trying to wrap his head around the notion of needing a life. What did Clay mean by that?

"He needs a life, Sam. A piece of a soul to keep him going. That's the sacrifice."

"I see..." There was a silence as Sam stood in pensive thought, then snapped out of it a moment later. "I'll give up one of mine."

His offer was met with wide eyes and raised eyebrows from both of them, but Tommy especially. He stared at Sam, who stared back and smiled. The ghost found it curious that this stranger – as in, a man he barely knew other by quick glimpses and name – was so ready and willing to sacrifice something clearly of value to him, and to the boy no less. A boy who regrettably reminded himself that he blamed Sam for his death.

Well... Partially blamed. New evidence showed a much more painful truth.

Now he knew the real culprit and the real reason behind it, he felt ashamed of himself. One for accusing the warden with no proof, and the other for falling for the trick of the bee boy's whimsical friendliness the stories had glorified.

Sam's willingness to help him was touching, and Tommy wanted to go and hug him again. But Clay stepped in again, banishing that possibility once again.

"Are you sure you have enough to sacrifice?" he asked.

Tommy watched as the warden's demeanour changed from sympathetic to harsh. His blackened eyes stared daggers at the phantom's friend. "I have enough," he replied simply.

The phantom noted a slight shift in Clay's stance, but he seemed to accept the answer nonetheless. He began to walk circles around the ghost. "Necromancy comes in many forms," he said. "And rituals have to be adapted accordingly." Clay's hand closed back around Tommy's wrist but this time, he didn't try and squirm out of it. He was too concentrated on what his friend was saying. "Fortunately, we have a phantom to work with, which is definitely easier than anything else."

"So, not everyone comes back as a ghost then?"

Clay and Tommy looked up at Sam, who had just spoken. Clay raised an eyebrow. "Why? Do you think they do?"

The warden shrugged. "You seem to be the expert on the matter."

"I think it's better if you stay quiet."

Tommy watched as Sam's grip around his trident tightened and his jaw clenched, but he obeyed Clay's demand. He stood as tall and as still as a statue.

"Tommy, I told you to listen!" Clay barked at the ghost.

He focused again, startled. The emerald eyes pierced his own, and another chill ran up him. He wanted to look away, but he couldn't, too hypnotized, and too scared. A rough hand came up and dragged itself down the side of his face.

"Good boy," Clay mumbled. "That's better."

Tommy didn't like this. He didn't like any of this. Clay was acting violently with him, short and impatient. Had he done something wrong? Why was he being treated like this? And Sam wasn't doing anything about it, except making small, futile attempts to move only to back down at the last second and stay still.

"Tommy, I want you to close your eyes."

The boy obeyed, and let his eyes flutter closed. The last image he had of the room were Clay's eyes, insistent and stern. The dark swallowed his senses.

"Good. Now, I need you to think carefully about whose life you want to take."

Whose life you want to take. There was a sharp, jagged edge to the tone that didn't escape Tommy – one that hid an implication.

He thought about it for a brief moment, and what it could mean. Sam was prepared to give him a life, and he was eternally grateful for that. But he also remembered how out of place Clay's confession about Tommy's death had seemed merely a few minutes prior, and then the commanding tone used since that the boy was slowly growing accustomed to.

In that moment, he understood exactly what Clay wanted, and the prospect made him shiver.

"Remember Tommy, think of nothing else. Only the life you want to take."

The phantom banished all thoughts from his mind, and focused on his mental image of the warden. The warm, caring man enveloped with that unknown emotion, who was ready to give him the world. Tommy couldn't bear to take any more from him than a simple hug.

His mind and body grew heavy, and he felt himself slowly fading. Out of existence or into a deep sleep, he didn't know. The image of Sam changed.

A boy no younger than Tommy himself, with messy brown hair and two little horns.

The phantom had never felt anger much as he did in that moment, and his fists scrunched up.

The blackness of his vision crept through him, drowning him slowly but surely. He began to forget all over again.

The golden roses.

The music discs.

The tall, jumpy hybrid with the mysterious journal.

The happy little ghost with the guitar and the blue sheep.

The dark black maze.

The man in the obsidian room.

Everything began to disappear, cleaning his mind and leaving him with a blank slate. The only thing that stayed was the image of the bee boy forever etched, and forever despised.

Tommy's mouth opened, or he thought it did. Only two words came out.

Fuck you.

The mailbox was empty. Of course it was. The captain didn't know what she was expecting. Then why did she still insist on routinely checking it every day, sometimes even twice? She closed it and drummed her fingers on the frost-covered top, lost in her thoughts.

Two days. It had been only two days since she had seen Dream, but it felt like an eternity. Yet in normal time, two days was not long. Maybe that was what explained the absence of any new letters. That was it. Except deep down, Puffy knew that the reason was so much more painful.

When she first washed up on the shores of the Greater SMP, she was regarded with contempt. Pirates – no matter how little they resembled the fearsome reputation they were given – were not appreciated, and one under the protection of two nations didn't sit right at first. Fitting in with everyone else at the beginning was difficult, and required her to work twice as hard, only to reach half as far.

The Badlands liked her, however, and tried to help her however they could. One of these ways was by writing letters to her. It was a little strange and silly at first, but Bad, Antfrost and Sam took it seriously. Every message was filled with funny quips, witty banter, and a whole lot of appreciation she didn't think she deserved. Eventually, as they grew closer, Bad and Ant stopped their part in favour of more present conversations.

But Sam continued. His letters to her kept coming, ranging from twice a week to at least once a month. Soon enough, his pile grew twice the size of his co-leaders', and they claimed a special place on a high shelf in her house. Sometimes, the letters came scented, either with the cool, clammy air of the prison he guarded or with the delicate smells of the flower forests bordering the Badlands' territory.

What at first seemed like merely a way to welcome an outcast into the realm soon turned into something else. When she first met him, Sam was quiet and reserved, which made their contact through the mail even more special. A friendship blossomed between them in the form of words, sentences and paragraphs that painted the most wonderful pictures, until he came out of his shell and began to be more present.

Even so, the letters continued. It was something wonderful for them, until it became a hindrance.

A single, accidental slip of his pen on one letter had consumed her mind for weeks. It was nothing really – just a small comma where it shouldn't have been. Yet when she first read it, it was enough to make her stop replying, for fear of ruining what they had with something breakable at the slightest slip-up. The pen would hover momentarily,

itching to write down a question, a demand for a confirmation, only to have it be put down and put off for another two days. It took a brief conversation between them to clear the misunderstanding, but the correspondence afterwards became scarcer and scarcer. There seemed to be a mutual understanding between them, and neither would purposely do anything to hurt the other.

The letters only picked up in the days following Tommy's death. Puffy knew from the unnecessary length and the messy handwriting in them that Sam was only writing as an escape from the grief pinning him down, but she still kept them precious with the others up on that high shelf, and re-read them often. Sam wasn't to blame: they indeed provided a much needed break from reality into a world built of affectionate prose and streaks of ink.

None had come since she last saw him, and it was explained by something a lot more hurtful than a busy life.

Puffy looked out into the distance. From the high hill where her home sat, she could see over Snowchester's ramparts, and out into the ocean beyond them. A dark, black box was just visible in the distance. Her gaze lingered on the Vault for a while more, until the thorn in her heart started jabbing at her again. Ripping her attention away from the sight that would only sadden her further, she went to enter her home.

The door was already unlocked. The captain frowned, puzzled. She was certain that she had locked it when she left for the docks... Perhaps Michelle – who now spent most of her days in Michael's company – came home to collect a toy or something else, and had forgotten to close it properly. Maybe Puffy *had* just forgotten to do it herself; her head still hurt her now and then from her fall.

Either way, it was out of the ordinary, and she was cautious. She carefully pushed it wide open, only to immediately be slapped in the face with a waft of a sugary aroma. A scented break in. Now that was something she hadn't seen before.

"Hello?" The captain made her way into her home, peering around. A symphony of crashes reached her ears, coming from her small kitchen. She wasted no time in rushing there, and burst into the scene.

What she saw was not what she expected to see. Tubbo let out a sharp cry when she entered, losing his grip on one of the numerous copper frying pans and other utensils he was balancing in his arms. He caught it just before it hit the floor, his ears rigid, and he froze. With eyes as wide as a deer's in a bright light, he sheepishly stomped his hoof as a greeting. "Hey Puffy!"

The captain sighed in relief. "Hello, Tubbo," she smiled, leaning against the wall. Neither of them moved for a while.

"I left your door open, didn't I?"

"Yes, yes you did."

"Sorry about that."

A more pressing question Puffy should have asked was what Tubbo was doing in her house, alone and without her permission. But then again, she was warmed by his presence, and she didn't have the heart to reprimand him. Instead, she watched as her son continued his impressive balancing act until he finally managed to pile everything on a free surface.

Tubbo brushed himself down, and reached for a dish on the counter. "Here!" He scampered towards her with a small plate of fluffy pancakes in his hands, drizzled with something golden and sticky. "I made you this!"

Ignoring the obvious question of how many different pots and pans Tubbo needed to make two pancakes, Puffy grinned as the sweet gift. She was right; the break-in was indeed a sweet one. "Thank you, Tubbo," she said.

"I just knew you were feeling a little down," he continued, handing her a fork. "I make these when I'm sad, or just need to relax. They don't fix everything, but they're still tasty."

And delicious they were indeed. For a moment, as she took a bite, the sticky honey slipping down her throat, she closed her eyes, and managed to forget. Forget her troubles, forget her feelings, and simply get lost in the moment. It was only for a moment, however, because when she opened her eyes again, Tubbo was up in her face and grinning.

"So?" he asked eagerly.

Puffy ruffled his fluffy brown hair. "You're an amazing cook," she told him. "Thank you."

"Oh come on, captain! You can do better than that!"

Before she even had the time to react, her little lamb leapt into her arms, hugging her tightly. She tried to push down the heavy emotion that had begun to rise within her, to no avail. She squeezed him back just as tightly. It felt odd.

Tubbo had been acting strangely the past few days. He seemed to spend more time with her, and popped in and out of her home as he pleased. He also offered small gestures and services, like taking care of Michelle or the instance today with the plate of pancakes. Granted, Puffy would probably have to clean the mess up afterwards, but it was still a thoughtful thing to do.

What happened? Was it their talk up on Tommy's grave, and the small moment of weakness and mourning they both shared? Did Tubbo know something she didn't? Did he... Did he *know*? Well if he did, he wasn't letting on to it.

"Why am I getting spoiled all of a sudden?" the captain couldn't help but ask, curiosity peaking.

She felt the short lamb in her arms shift, shrugging. "I need to keep an eye on you. Can't have someone telling everyone about me blubbing like a baby that other time."

She knew from his tone that he was joking, but she played along. "Ah, so you're buying me off with treats and favours, are you?" she smirked, amused.

"Depends." Tubbo looked up at her. "Is it working?"

Puffy let out a hearty laugh, and nodded. "Fortunately for you, yes it is."

"That's a relief!" She watched as he sneakily attempted to steal a small lick of honey from the half-eaten pancakes laid on a shelf beside them, not that she was going to stop him anyway.

She thought that after that, Tubbo would let go and trot off to do something else, but he stayed put, cuddled up against her. She shook him gently, making sure he hadn't dozed off. "You alright there?"

"Hmm... Yeah, I'm fine." When Tubbo spoke, there was always an air of assurance in his tone and he always seemed to speak like a true leader. And yet, now it seemed to be slipping. "I just... I miss having company."

"Are you..." She didn't want to say what she was thinking for fear of provoking him, but at the same time, if she couldn't be honest about her lamb's parentage, she could at

least be truthful when it came to other things. "Are you missing Ranboo?" Tubbo didn't reply, and Puffy felt her stomach sink as she realized that she might have messed up.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. I just hope he's alright..." The sorrow and bitterness in his confirmation didn't escape her, and she hugged him tighter. "But I like you, Puffy. I like your company. You're warm and welcoming." She felt him lightly headbutt her chest, his two small horns digging into her. Looking closer, she noticed that the tips had started to curl. They were growing.

"I like your company too," Puffy told him too, although her reasoning behind it was so much more than he could ever understand. However, maybe Tubbo did at least feel something, some sense of security. He stayed where he was, snuggled against her with his head down.

She brushed part of his fringe aside. As she did, a couple of stray bees that had hitched a ride in his hair snook out, making a *bee-line* for the nearest windows. She glimpsed the burns scarring his face, and delicately touched them. The patches of mutilated skin were rough under her fingers, and she let out a stifled sob. How could anyone do this to her son...? How could Schlatt let any of it happen? How could *she* let any of it happen?

Puffy expected Tubbo to pull away when she stroked the side of his face, but he didn't. If anything, he pressed further against her, like a small child gripping his mother. Which was exactly what he was, although he had no idea. It still made her smile. "Tubbo..."

"Tell me if I'm being a little too much," he said, his voice muffled. "Tommy used to say I was way too touchy."

"No, no." Puffy placed a gentle kiss on his forehead despite herself. "You're fine."

"This feels nice," the lamb bleated. "I haven't had a proper hug in a while..."

Captain Puffy said nothing, not wanting to break the gentleness between them with spoken words or remorseful thoughts. She closed her eyes, and focused on his heartbeat. The warm air from her fireplace tickled her skin, and she sighed. The sugary taste of honey still lingered on her tongue, and the addictive smell of cooked food filled her nostrils. Everything seemed perfect, and was exactly how she always wanted it to be. Well, almost.

"I love you, my darling lamb." The single confession slipped out on her own accord, and it was too late to retract it now. The moment to finally have a talk had arrived, and the captain felt unusually calm. Tubbo didn't reply, but his stance had turned rigid. He was still pressed against her. Puffy looked down, and gave him a little nudge. "I just thought I should tell you," she grinned, finding the courage to finally speak up properly.

To her surprise, he still didn't answer her. That was odd. Maybe he got a little too cosy. With another small nudge, she tried to shake him awake. "Tubbo? Are you sleeping?"

She waited for a reply. It never came. Puzzled, she pulled away a little. Immediately her son's body went limp, and fell to the floor. That was when she realized that the rhythmic thudding of his small, peaceful heartbeat had stopped, even when he was still huddled against her.

She panicked. "TUBBO!" she cried, dropping to her knees. Raising the limp body off the floor and onto her lap, she frantically began to pat his cheeks, desperate to wake him up. She ignored the glassy look in his half-open eyes. The trembling in her body increased by the second.

When Tubbo still didn't react, his head lolling to one side, Puffy began to scream for help. All the while, something began to viciously tear her insides apart, carving a deep chasm. This time, it was a hole she could never fill even if she tried.

The ritual was something Sam didn't expect. He knew – from his time as what he could only describe as being a spy within the Eggpire – that most rituals involved candles and blood-curdling words in languages even the initiated didn't understand. Blood offerings and symbolic markings were also widely used, laid in circles around the groups performing said ceremonies. Although, he also knew of other rituals that didn't involve any dark magic, like the pagan ones celebrated by druids and flower fairies involving light, airy dances, joyful smiles and the vegetation around them.

But this ritual – this important, powerful piece of necromancy that Dream was currently using – was simple. Very simple. Excruciatingly simple, even.

It involved no pomp, no ceremony, and no sound. Sam felt extremely out of place, and shifted from foot to foot. A shiver ran down his spine. The darkness on the other side of the lava chasm was gaping, and in all honesty, he was scared to turn around to

face it, for fear of seeing something stare back. So instead, he kept his gaze trained on the two figures in front of him.

Everything was silent. Sam held his breath, the mere thought of interrupting what was happening unfathomable to him. His hands were sweating inside his gloves. His trident weighed in his grasp, and his rigid back began to ache. He watched the scene unfold.

Tommy – or, well, his ghost rather – had his eyes screwed shut, just as they had been for a while now. His face was scrunched up in deep concentration, as it had been when Dream first asked him to think deeply. He looked so tense that Sam thought he was about to burst, and he wanted nothing more than to approach him and assure him that everything was fine. That he was safe. That he was doing good, better than the warden could have ever done in that same situation.

He wanted to, but he knew he couldn't. Dream, unfortunately, was right; there would be time for all that later.

The warden glanced at his prisoner. It still felt like a miracle. Dream had agreed so easily to the deal and although a few of the favours unnecessarily sparked his paranoia, Sam had to admit that each demand in return was reasonable. There was no trickery, and no harm done, and now he was dutifully standing behind Tommy with his hands gently laid on his shoulders.

That was the only thing that disturbed Sam with the entire "ritual". Dream had his hands on the boy, and even though he stayed completely still, Sam couldn't help but fear a violent outburst. The images of him suddenly lashing out and attacking the child flashed in his mind, and it took him all his might to stop himself from stepping in and interrupting the whole process. Whatever the process was exactly.

If there was a spell involved, he couldn't hear it. If there was some sort of physical offering, he couldn't see it. If there was some sort of ceremonial movement performed, it wasn't done. Everyone present stood in perfect silence, and perfectly still.

Sam found himself wondering all of a sudden what he was getting himself into. He would give all of his lives for Tommy in a heartbeat, that wasn't the problem. Would it hurt? Did Dream actually know what he was doing? Was the necromancy a lie, and he was actually poisoning Sam with obscure knowledge as they stood there?

The warden's eyes were drawn back to the pale form of the ghost in front of him. Immediately, all his worries were washed away. Dream was being honest. He was trying

to help. Why else would Tommy's phantom be present? Sam had never realized that the boy had come back as a ghost, and the realization hurt him.

The compass disappearing and reappearing, the discs mysteriously appearing out of nowhere and playing themselves, and even that small, feather-light touch that had startled him a while back. All of it was Tommy's doing, and the warden hadn't even taken a moment to entertain the thought that he could have come back.

Ghosts were nothing new to his day-to-day routines. Outside the Vault, a couple roamed the lands, and Ghostbur acted much more alive and caring than many of the living creatures around him. It was normal, and perhaps that was why Sam had never thought about it before. Tommy had shown time and time again that he was much more than an ordinary kid.

Things began to make sense, and Sam cursed his own density. However, speaking of density, Dream's voice cut through the air. "Sam!" He sounded excited. "It's working!"

Sam immediately focused back on the scene, and held his breath. Dream was smiling at him, letting out breathless chuckles, and his hands were gripping something strong, something denser than the grieving warden. Something that had its life trickling back into it.

Tommy's eyes were still shut, and his body was still rigid, although now Sam paid close attention, he could see that colour was slowly draining back. The body was like an empty bottle, clear and plain. Someone or something had popped open the cork, and an invisible hand was pouring a rich and bright colour palette back into it. The colours seemed to know exactly where to go, and the cell began to lighten. Tommy's body continued to fill with richness, warmth and life in front of Sam's very eyes. The boy's rigidity began to soften, until his muscles sagged.

Sam was transfixed. The nervous trembling he had felt earlier turned into anticipation. His heart began to race. It took a while for the ritual to finally end and when it did, no one spoke. Dream pulled away from Tommy and skulked to a darkened corner. He seemed so exhausted, despite his previous exertions being nothing but walking around and holding on to a ghost's shoulders for twenty minutes. Sam wondered briefly if the revival had been the cause of the prisoner's low energy.

"Where am I...?"

The red phantom had opened his eyes. Or rather, *Tommy* had opened his eyes. Living, breathing Tommy. His hands were wrapped around himself, gripping at his arms with weak fingers. His question came out as a feeble croak from a raspy, sore throat.

Sam didn't dare answer, or even move. He was too scared, too hopeful. What if everything was just a dream? What if the moment he took a step and reached for the boy, everything would come crashing down and he'd wake up in a cold sweat, alone and locked in his mourning? He held his breath.

It was only when Tommy crumbled to his knees that he reacted. He rushed to his side, and crouched down. Steadying the boy in front of him, he forced himself to give him a reassuring smile. "You're safe," he whispered comfortingly, stroking a streak of perfect white hair he was certain the boy didn't have before. "You're safe..."

"I..." Tommy's gaze was misty and unfocused. He didn't even look up at Sam, and kept his head down. It was as if his neck didn't have the strength to hold his own head up. In fact, it seemed that his entire body had given up, limp and powerless. "I'm... so cold..."

Without any hesitation, Sam removed one of his gloves, and pressed the back of his hand to Tommy's head. The feel of warm flesh throb under his hands finally sealed the truth, the truth Sam had been hoping for all that time.

Tommy was *alive*. Alive, but burning up and most likely sick.

"It's alright," the warden murmured, getting to work. He unfastened his cape and wrapped the boy up in it, before heaving him into his arms. He smiled at him, trying to mask his growing worry. "I'll get you out of here." Tommy's body was exceptionally light, and Sam had no trouble picking him up.

For a moment, he looked over the boy's burning skin. The bruises were gone, as were the bleeding cuts. The situation of Tommy's limp body in his arms dragged up a fresh and far from forgotten nightmare he had lived through, but this time was different.

This time, Tommy was being carried out of the cell alive.

Alive, alive, alive, alive.

The word was like music to Sam's ears, an angel's touch, the most wonderful word in the world. He never knew how beautiful it was until his mind began to chant it incessantly. He couldn't get enough of it. Such a small word, yet such a big, big deal.

Before he left, he turned to the other living creature in the cell. Dream had retreated back to his usual spot at the back of the room, and sat down as he usually did. No emotion, no quips. Just a blissful, usual silence. His eyes were closed and for a moment, the warden thought he was asleep.

Nevertheless, he spoke his way. "Thank you," he said.

Dream's eyes snapped open, and stared at Sam. Then, almost as quickly as he had awoken, he closed them again.

Sam waited for the prisoner to speak or react to his expression of gratitude, but he was sorely disappointed. With a slight frown, he turned away, only to gain a smile once more as Tommy snuggled up against his armour.

Sam's footsteps thundered against the obsidian and blackstone floors as he ran out of the Vault, Tommy still tightly bundled up in his arms. He didn't stop to check any of the doors or security systems, and in fact almost forgot his keys twice along the way. The race through the prison still felt excruciatingly long, and Sam's smile had faltered considerably, letting his concern for the boy's health peak.

When the briny air of the outdoors filled his lungs, Sam still didn't stop running. He dashed all the way down the Prime Path, darting between confused travellers who barely noticed that he was carrying the world's most precious package in his arms. He bolted all the way to the house under the hill, and all but kicked through the stiff oak doors.

Tommy's home was deliciously warm, and Sam headed for the bed. There, he tucked in the weakened boy, and finally felt himself relax. He didn't know at what moment Tommy had fallen asleep, but he was out cold when he was made comfortable.

Sam's gestures became gentle instead of frantic and erratic, and he inspected the streak in Tommy's hair closer. It seemed to shine out against his already-bright features, and was most likely a side-effect of the revival process, along with a sickness Sam hoped was nothing more than a common cold. Even if it was, he'd be there. He'd watch over Tommy for as long as it took, and for as long as he was needed to. He'd give him everything he wanted, and everything he needed, just as he once promised to.

The warden leaned over and placed an affectionate kiss to the top of Tommy's golden haired head. "Welcome home, Theseus," he whispered with the brightest smile that had graced his face in ages.

Chapter Forty-One: The Third Festival Of Woe

Mornings, days and nights passed by in a blur. The Vault was blissfully quiet for most of it, as was the Antarctic Commune. Kinoko's rebuilding was still in full swing. One of the pagodas was finally and fully restored, and everyone cheered.

The wheels of Las Nevadas' slot machines kept turning and ringing, spitting out glitzy prizes and coins. Glasses of alcohol held by lavishly dressed gamblers chimed against one another and spilled over onto the plush red carpets.

The nymphs of the Badlands' forests summoned garlands of brightly coloured flowers between the trees, just in time for their solstice celebrations. The Prime Path bustled with the hum of weary travellers. The Pogtopia chasm was being cleared out and pillaged. In short, life went on.

Life went on. It had never sounded so true and so wonderful.

"Alright, so first I'm going to shuffle the deck. That's the only good way to do a magic trick."

"Of course. Mix 'em for me, king."

"Every card is different, correct?"

"Seems like it."

"Alright. Say stop whenever you want."

A second passed as the cards were dropped one after the other. "Stop."

"Good. This will be your card." Sam flipped it over.

Tommy nodded. "Got it. Do you want to know what it is?"

"Tommy, I can see it. It's the nine of hearts."

"Wait, so what's the point of the trick then?"

"It doesn't matter for this one." The warden smiled. He took the card back. "I'm going to put it in the middle of the deck, and snap my fingers. Did you see it happen?"

"Yeah?" Sam flipped over the top card of the deck. The nine of hearts stared back. "Wait— holy shit! How did you do that?"

Sam grinned again, but didn't answer. "Now, I'm going to take the nine, and put it back in the middle." He did so, and snapped his fingers. "Did you see it happen that time?" He turned over the top card. It was the nine of hearts. Again.

He smirked as Tommy's jaw dropped. "Huh...?" the boy breathed in a quiet voice. "No, no, no!" He leaned over the table, and tried to peer under the deck. The blanket began to slip from around his shoulders. "You're using some form of witch-trickery! I swear there are magnets involved!"

Sam took the nine of hearts, and put it back in the middle. He shuffled the deck. "Say stop whenever you want."

"Stop."

"How did you know?" The card produced was once again the infamous nine of hearts.

"You rigged it!" Tommy exclaimed, sounding less and less confident as time ticked on. "It's from the back! It must be..."

"What do you mean it's from the back?" Sam coyly flipped over the top card once more, carefully awaiting Tommy's reaction.

"WHAT THE FUCK?! This isn't funny, Sam." But the warden knew perfectly well that Tommy was lying. The small curve at the corner of his lips told him a million things.

"Now, we can put it back in the middle, drop the deck for a minute and boom! It's there!"

"Huh—"

"Then put it back, snap, and now it's on the top!" Sam was having way, way too much fun now. "Then flip it over, snap, flip over the deck and it's underneath the bottom card."

"What the— I'm not having any of this shit, Sam! I've just woken up, and you're trying to mind control me, I can see it! I can see what you're trying to do!"

Sam laughed loudly and heartily at the confused comments and exclamations. "Hold on, let me see if I can do the good part of the trick. I'm a little rusty, so it might be hard..."

"If you're rusty, then what the fuck was all that?!" Tommy coughed.

"Alright, so." Sam produced the nine of hearts again, and ignored Tommy's splutters of disbelief. He divided the pack into two and held each of them in one hand, far away from the other. He slipped the nine into one of them, keeping it just visible. With one perfectly timed sleight of hand, he pushed it in and pulled it out of the second deck. From Tommy's view, it would look like the card had jumped from one hand to the other. Sam hoped he did it right. "Did you see it?"

Tommy's eyes widened, and the warden knew he had succeeded in getting the illusion to work. "I... What... Shit..." The kid collapsed onto the table, staring up at the deck in shock. "Congratulations, king. You've broken me."

Sam laughed, and ruffled the top of Tommy's head. The boy went rigid for a brief moment, and the warden thought he was going to pull away and curse. Instead, he tentatively leaned into Sam's touch, and closed his eyes. His hair was scruffy and matted, as usual, but the softness was still there, and so was the golden shine only rivalled by the sun itself. He sucked in a large, disgusting sniff, his cold still very much present.

Sam's heart was about to burst, yet again. He had stopped keeping track after the third time that same morning alone. Everything the boy did, from giving him a smile to making jokes and comments about everything and anything – heck, even swearing! – made Sam even happier than he ever thought he could possibly be. All the burdens and the pain that he had carried for so long were suddenly lifted off his shoulders. He felt as light as air. As he combed his fingers through Tommy's hair and watched him hum, content, Sam was reminded of the most important thing.

Tommy was *alive*.

"It's nice to see cards being used for something other than endless rounds of solitaire," Tommy suddenly said, snapping him back to reality. A reality, the warden now realized with a smile, he wanted to be a part of more than ever.

"Endless rounds of solitaire? Where did that come from?"

"Limbo," he replied, and Sam fell silent.

Not all the sorrow was lifted quite yet. The occasional frown from Tommy, the look in his eyes, or even the way he was scared of being touched reminded Sam that not all the storm clouds had cleared. "I'm sorry. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

To his surprise, Tommy shook his head and sat up straight, determined. "You know what? I will. There's no point in hiding it."

The warden blinked, startled. Tommy was... willingly wanting to talk about his afterlife experience? What happened to the kid Sam met who would lash out when someone even suggested that he might be having a bad day? The one who held every grudge, and every trust issue? The one that took over half a year to finally realize that Sam's concern for him was not out of pity? "Tommy, you don't have to if you don't want to..."

"I will. You deserve to know."

Sam began to wonder if death really changed people, but if it helped Tommy open up and not have to go through everything alone, he wasn't going to complain. Sam put down the deck of cards, and watched as Tommy got up. The boy discarded the blanket, which perhaps wasn't the best idea seeing as he was still recovering from the revival process. He cleared his throat. Sam could tell it was still a bit scratchy.

"Now, picture this!" Tommy stretched out his hands. "Dream takes my final life. Everything goes black. For how long? I do not know. But when I open my eyes, what I see is absolutely magnificent!" He began to prance over the dirt floor, his gestures flourished and theatrical as he re-enacted his supposed experience. "Guess where I was!"

Sam leaned on the back of his chair, watching the show unfold with an interested but confused expression on his face. "I don't have a clue," he smiled, playing along.

"I was in a theatre," the boy said. "A big, marble amphitheatre, and it looked all Greek and shit! Like the legends! The sun was beating down on me, blinding my senses, but I wasn't fazed." He stopped abruptly, hands on hips. "I was wearing full netherite armour, and had the sharpest sword you'd ever seen. It was so cool!" He winked. "And the crowd was only made up of women."

"Poggers," Sam chuckled, amused by Tommy's description.

"Yeah, it fucking was! They were all head over heels for me! And Henry was there too, y'know, Henry! My cow! He was my sidekick! And I definitely needed one. Remember when Technoblade called me Theseus?"

Briefly, yes. Sam did recall. Techno's long, convoluted warning to Tommy on November 16th was indeed something many remembered, and the comparison stayed. Tommy even started to be nicknamed after the mythical hero, and he didn't exactly seem to mind when someone let it slip out to his face. The warden nodded. "I do."

"Well, he was right! There was a Minotaur in the theatre. A MINOTAUR! A beefy, big motherfucker, with mean little eyes and sharp horns, but he was no match for me and my trusty steed!" He began to demonstrate the supposed fight, almost punching Sam in the process. "I killed it, and everyone cheered for both me and Henry, and then I married all the women and lived the rest of my death in luxury." With a deep bow, Tommy concluded his dramatic story. Sam clapped politely.

"I still don't see where solitaire fits into all this," he said.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Well, Wilbur was there too, the prick. Kept wanting us to play stupid card games all the time, and every round felt like an eternity. Schlatt was lucky. He slept most of the fucking time."

The warden nodded slowly. "I see. Well, your limbo sounded very festive."

"It was!"

"I'm sorry for taking you out of it." Guilt was pooling inside his stomach, and for the first time, he was doubting his decision. Puffy's question came back to him; did Tommy even want to be revived in the first place?

A friendly punch to his arm brought him back to the conversation, and Tommy heaved himself up onto the table ledge, his feet idly kicking Sam's shin guards. "Are you kidding me?" he grinned. "I'm happy to be back!"

"Really?"

"Yeah!" He shrugged. "I mean, the revival itself was a bit of a bitch, but other than that, it's good to feel alive again. Thanks, Sam."

The expression of gratitude was so simple, and so nonchalant. Why was it on the verge of making the warden cry? Sam placed a hand on Tommy's leg. "You're welcome." *Son*, he almost added at the end despite himself.

The boy began to rock back and forth on the edge, and the warden made sure to be ready to catch him if an accident was to occur. "I'm bored," Tommy hummed, turning to Sam. "Can we go outside?" Sam's hesitance to reply must have been apparent, because the boy started whining. "Pleeeeeeeaaase?"

"Nothing really happened recently," Sam said with a shrug. "Just the same old landscape."

"But I've technically been away for *ages*," the boy pouted, dragging out the last word.

"It might rain," the warden attempted to argue. Feebly, if he had to be honest.

"Saaaaam!" There it was, that familiar whining of Sam's name. Others found it obnoxious, he found it endearing. It made him melt.

There were a few reasons Sam was hesitant to take Tommy out of his humid, troglodyte home. The Egg was out there, for one thing, and had been growing incessantly ever since the Vault was locked down. The other few reasons required a serious conversation between the two of them, and Sam had been putting it off for as long as he could. Bright, impatient and persuasive Tommy had now brought that talk upon them however, and there was no way to bypass it this time. "Tommy," he ventured, giving him a serious stare. "You do realize that no one knows you're back, right?"

Tommy's impatience died down, and he nodded sombrely. "I know," he said. "But so what?"

"I don't want to put you in any more danger. I don't want you to lose your life again."

"But hey! I guess Dream could just revive me, couldn't he?"

"Well... yes, theoretically, but I already gave him enough favours to be able to get you back the first time. Next time, the price will be higher." How high, Sam had no idea, and he definitely didn't want to find out. "He'll take advantage of it."

"Are you talking about your lives?" The boy's eyes travelled him up and down. "Eh, you still have enough to breathe and be a dickhead about all this, so you can just give me another one."

"Wait, you remember that?" the warden asked, surprised.

Tommy nodded quickly. "Things are starting to come back to me," he said, then grimaced. "Being a ghost sucked, I'll tell you that much. I remember the life thing." He rolled up his sleeve, and looked down at his arm. Sam stared too as the beating, red tattoo sat alongside the three others. A fourth chance at life, and Sam couldn't be happier.

Although, he was still puzzled by one, small detail. "Well, strangely enough, I still have my lives," he decided to reveal.

"Wait, seriously?"

"All of them."

"Which is how many?"

"Oh no you don't," he chuckled at Tommy's attempt to slyly pry some information out of him. "That's confidential."

Tommy crossed his arms, rolling his eyes. "Shit..." he scoffed.

Sam smirked. "But yes, turns out, your revival didn't take any from me." For some reason, that troubled him greatly. He didn't deserve to remain intact.

"So, you think that bastard was lying?" Tommy suddenly asked him.

The warden shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps he was just mistaken."

"Good for you then, am I right?"

"I guess, yes."

"And good for me too!" Tommy's abrupt, coy smile took Sam aback, and he realized in dismay that the boy had once again turned the tables. "That means I can be revived as many times as I want without you having to pay for it!"

Sam wanted to retort and tell Tommy exactly what Dream's agreement to the whole situation entailed, to warn him again that it wasn't a game and that there was indeed a price to pay. But Tommy's smirk of victory was wide, and the warden didn't have the heart to burst his bubble just yet. "Technically," he sighed. He drummed his fingers on the table, pensive.

He was dragged out of his thoughts almost immediately by a pair of bright blue eyes appearing in his line of vision, laughing and young. "Tommy to the Warden," Tommy probed, snapping his fingers in front of his eyes. "Is that a yes? Can we go out?"

The warden raised his gaze, and tilted his head to the side. "Well..." His former hesitation returned, although much less consuming than before. It was so relaxed, in fact, that Sam caved in. "There's a festival happening right now in the Greater SMP, if you want to check it out."

That was the only answer he needed to give, as Tommy punched the air with a cry of delight. He began rambling all about his excitement, and Sam just watched with a smile. Tommy was seventeen. One more year and he'd be an adult, and yet Sam had never seen anyone as childish as the boy in that moment. In *those* moments.

Of course, before they left, they talked over Sam's concerns. Now he had got his way, Tommy thankfully listened to what the warden had to say, and agreed to wear a hooded cloak to conceal his identity. That said, Sam did notice that Tommy opted for the brightest colour he had in his house, which was a vibrant shade of red. The hood also had two, long strips of fabric sewed to it, resembling a pair of rabbit ears. Faced with it, Sam couldn't help but laugh, and Tommy was quick to jump in with an explanation. "I went to watch the Championships once," he huffed, putting it on. "The Red Rabbits were cool, alright?"

The warden knew the boy's words held no real grudge towards him, and he smiled. "Whatever you say, Big Man," he teased, flicking one of the floppy ears.

A few minutes later, they left the house. Tommy's previous eagerness to get outside was momentarily crushed when the blinding sun hit them both, and he ducked back into his house. Sam waited patiently until the boy had regained his bearings, and joined him once again. His eyes were narrowed against the daytime glare he had most certainly not seen in ages, and the hood was pulled low over his eyes. It didn't surprise the warden when Tommy's hand found his, and held on tightly. Sam squeezed back, giving him a few, reassuring words, and they were on their way.

As they strolled towards Eret's castle, Sam suddenly realized how misjudged his outing suggestion had been. There had only been two other festivals of this caliber in the realm, and both of them had ended in tragedy and bloodshed.

The Red Festival, The Green Festival, and from the bright banners cloaking the castle walls, what would very likely be known as The Golden Festival.

"Slow poke," Tommy teased, seemingly gaining a little more confidence once the decorations came into view. He let go of the warden's hand, and was happily skipping a few steps in front of him.

Sam rolled his eyes. "You're younger than me," he sighed, tutting.

"No shitty excuses! I once saw you win a two versus one battle with nothing but your bare hands!" With a smug smile, the boy turned away, and an amused Sam picked up the pace.

If the warden was being completely honest, festivals were not his favourite thing. All the loud noises, the excitement and the colours were extremely overwhelming, and anyway, the last one he attended ended with a bloodthirsty piglin warrior going ballistic on the crowd. Sam wasn't too fond of them. In fact, he wasn't even planning to attend this one until the main organiser sought him out specifically.

"I need some machines," King Eret had told him.

Sam had been invited to a simple dinner in the palace a while back. It was held during the lockdown period in Pandora's Vault, and the warden hadn't wanted to go, worried sick about Tommy who was stuck in the main cell. But for diplomatic reasons – leader to leader – he was pushed to graciously accept the invite. Bad and Ant hadn't been invited. It didn't take a genius to know why.

"That's vague," a stiff, anxious Sam had replied, his eyes occasionally darting to the large mechanical clock on the wall. He had barely been there half an hour, but even that felt too long. He needed to find the break-in attempt's culprit, and fast. How could he dine on fine meats in luxury when a young boy was locked up with his greatest enemy?

King Eret took a sip of his wine, and spoke again. "I need machines that will enchant and amaze," he specified, either oblivious or purposely ignoring Sam's impatience.

"Why haven't you contracted any other engineers from the Badlands?" the warden asked.

"I think we both know," Eret replied, and a silence followed. The Egg had a hold on so many people, and everyone knew it.

Eventually, Sam had hurriedly agreed to the commission and got out of there, back to the Vault. He sketched out a few designs in the days that followed, then contacted his team of engineers in Las Nevadas to build them, as they were the only ones he knew were far away from the Egg's influence.

If Sam hadn't received that commission, he would have turned a blind eye to the festival as a whole. However, since he did help work on the redstone side of things, he thought he'd pop in for an hour or so and look around, as the ever welcoming monarch of the realm insisted he do. An hour, in and out, just out of common courtesy.

But now Tommy was back, Sam realized with a defeated smile that he was being dragged along into the festivities whether he liked it or not.

There was no particular reason that this festival was taking place, at least not to Sam's knowledge. No anniversaries, no victories to rub in anyone's face, nothing. It just seemed like a pompous, colourful way to relax after all the wars and all the grief.

That, or perhaps Eret's claim on the throne was slipping once again, and he wanted an excuse to display his power and root himself as the rightful ruler of the Greater SMP. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd done that; the hurried, almost random bestowing of titles on people was a prime example. The Red Duke, the Marquis and the Count of the Northern Mountains didn't mean much and Bad, Antfrost and Sam had accepted the ranks with the deepest bows and even deeper confusion. When they eventually formed the Badlands and split from the Greater SMP, the ploy to form strong, close allies was eventually revealed and Sam dropped his meaningless title. His co-leaders kept them, which Sam remembered had unsettled Eret during their last formal audience.

But now Dream was imprisoned and no longer held influence over the king, surely Eret was safe, and any more devious plans to assert dominance were non-existent? Sam didn't know for sure.

All he knew at that moment was that the palace was more splendid than it had ever been before. Golden drapes weaved from the finest of Kinoko's silks cascaded over the ramparts, billowing gently in the breeze. They shone magnificently in the bright midday

sun and in the coloured lights of the multitude of fireworks that went off below them. Sam couldn't help but notice that the large red tendril crushing the walls – that general rumours had begun to theorize that Bad had "planted" – was gone. He didn't think too much about it.

The moment Sam and Tommy walked under the portcullis and into the courtyard, the noise hit them. Laughter, banging, the whirring of redstone machines, music, footsteps... It seemed like every single sound in existence had gathered together, weaving a loud, raucous jungle of noises that momentarily stunned both of them. Tommy's hand nervously found Sam's again, and they stood at the entrance, soaking everything up.

Hundreds of stalls lined the stone ramparts, and the paths and walkways bustled with people. Brightly lit, loud games clearly based off those in Las Nevadas whirled to life, and groups of ambulant musicians pranced between the crowds, their flutes and fiddles playing wild and upbeat tunes. Toys, sugary treats and other unidentified, useless trinkets lay out in full display, attracting the attention of small, excitable children who clutched spitting firecrackers and sparklers in their grubby hands.

It was absolute chaos, but the best kind that made everyone feel alive.

"You alright?" Sam couldn't help but feel Tommy's sudden hesitation now he was faced with the sheer amount of people, some of which used to bow to his command or shunned his very name. "We could go home if you'd like–"

"No." The boy's reply was short and determined. His tenseness seemed to die down, as did his grip on Sam. The warden did notice how he lowered his hood a little more. He looked at him, and he finally saw the pure excitement in his blue eyes. "Now, this is the real shit!" Sam expected Tommy to suddenly rush off on his own and leave the warden to wait nervously for his return, but instead, Tommy pulled him along. "Let's have some fun!"

Now *that* was a word he hadn't heard in a while, least of all spouted from the mouth of a kid.

Sam didn't care for festivals but that day, at that moment, he would. For the golden rose.

Later, he realized it was a good call after all. The festival was overwhelming, as he had expected, but that was clearly the point. Reality was swept away by a loud, odorous

fantasy, and history was briefly cast aside in favour of amusement and the joy of being hoodwinked.

Sam got to marvel at the redstone wonders his engineers built up close. After accidentally letting slip to an enchanted-eyed Tommy that he designed them, the boy began to point and drag them both towards every single one, asking relentless questions and bragging to any onlookers that he knew the creator himself and they didn't. Once or twice, Sam saw an air of confusion paint itself across some of the faces Tommy spoke to, their foreheads creased as they wondered why the obnoxious young boy with the covered face sounded so familiar to them. They never acted on their hunches, and the warden was relieved.

There were a few other mechanical attractions that Sam didn't design. One of these was held in a darkened tent, where a "movie" from the Old World was playing on a "projector". Of course, Sam had heard of both things but had never seen one himself, and from Tommy's focused gaze and hitched breath, it was apparent that he hadn't the slightest idea of their existence. The film was one of adventure and fantastical creatures as the old civilisations perceived them. It was a pity, as if they bothered to venture a little further past their ocean borders, they would have got a much more accurate picture.

But it was still amazing, and after an hour or two, when they eventually emerged back into the blinding sunlight, Tommy had another goal under his belt. "I want my life to be turned into a movie someday," he said, confident and dreamy.

Sam tilted his head and stared at the boy. "Really?"

"Oh, absolutely! I think it'll be a banger, and much more interesting than that one in there." He jabbed a disdainful thumb back towards the tent, and Sam laughed.

The movie was quickly forgotten as they moved on to explore the rest of the fair, Tommy making delighted and witty comments all the way. He wouldn't shut up, and Sam wasn't going to make him.

The only shadow that briefly clouded their time together was when Tommy tried his hand at a shooting game a few stalls down. He knocked over all the cans in only a couple of shots, and triumphantly raised the smoking pistol in the air. Sam had to admit that he was incredibly impressed.

"If I had managed to shoot like that during my duel with Dream," the boy cackled as he picked out his prize – another music disc that he somehow didn't already own. "L'Manberg's independence would have been won a lot differently."

The offhanded reminder of how Tommy lost his second of three lives momentarily burst Sam's relaxed bubble, and he couldn't help but grip his shoulder.

Tommy looked from the hand up to the warden. "What was that for?"

Sam hesitated. "Mosquito," he lied, and changed the subject.

The fireworks and pyrotechnic displays soon banished any and all obscure thoughts from the minds present, and their wonderful time together resumed.

Sam had noticed that Tommy never tried to get away from him, or lose him in the crowd. The boy stuck diligently by his side, and made sure both of them were happy and distracted at every turn. Gone was the Tommy that would shake off the warden at every opportunity, and refuse to believe that he could be loved and cared for without having to give anything in return.

Unconditional love was something that Tommy had never seemed to have encountered, but at that moment, as he lay his head against Sam's shoulder, eyes glued to the actors in front of them prancing around the oak wood stage, the warden had an inkling that he was beginning to understand.

They sat down on a grassy part of the castle grounds a while later with steaming food in their laps. Pressed up against the stone walls of the castle, warm from the beating sun, Sam raised his gaze up to the ramparts. Over the main gate, a few, imposing flags fluttered in the breeze. The first two were quite recognisable: the Greater SMP with its green, black and white design, and a rainbow flag that was once a symbol of liberty and acceptance in the Old World's prejudiced, oppressing societies. The next ones, although Sam hadn't seen them often, he knew too. The brightly coloured one with the semi-circle that resembled a mushroom was Kinoko Kingdom's banner, and the blue, white and yellow one belonged to Snowchester.

The only flag that Sam was surprised to see was the one depicting an abstract-shaped, silver trident on a black and red background: the Badlands. For a nation that was certainly not recognized as independent by the Greater SMP, it was still being treated as one, and the small gesture made Sam crack a smile.

"Holy shit, is that Eret?"

Sam turned his attention to where Tommy was pointing, and watched as a tall, elegant figure made their way through the crowd. The king stood out anywhere he walked, with an impeccable taste in fashion and a genuine smile. From the way he was greeted by the visitors, you would have never thought that he had backstabbed L'Manberg all those years ago.

"Seems like it," he replied.

He waited for Tommy's insult, which strangely enough never came. "He's cool," the boy said, taking a bite out of his candyfloss.

Sam smiled. "You're cool too, Tommy."

"Sam, please. I'm wearing a pair of dumb little bunny ears." The warden cracked another laugh for the twentieth time that day alone. As he did, he saw the boy grin as well. "Fucking hell, you'll really laugh at anything!"

"You're a funny kid, Tommy," Sam replied with a content sigh. "Much funnier than you know."

"Compliment accepted," he grinned, mouth full with sticky pink candy.

Sam couldn't help himself, and spoke again. "You can't imagine how hard it was without you." Immediately, he tensed up, knowing he had said what he shouldn't have.

Tommy's sticky chewing slowed to a halt, and he stared at Sam again. "So, you did miss me then?" he asked, to which the warden nodded.

"More than you could ever know." It was true. A hole that had remained vacant and gaping for so long had finally been filled again, and he couldn't be more grateful. Of course, there were a few others that had formed since, but one of the biggest was finally fixed. It gave Sam hope that the others would also heal someday.

Tommy felt silent again for a moment, but only for a moment. After all, he was Tommy. "Honestly, I'm surprised," he said. "I thought I would have been forgotten by now."

"Forgotten?" Sam let out a chuckle, but it was strained. "How could anyone ever forget you? You've done so many great things—"

"And some real shitty ones too." He paused. "If I'm forgotten, it's because people want me to be."

"I won't," the warden leapt in with all the sincerity he could. "I will never forget you."

Tommy looked like he was about to say something – perhaps a thank you or a display of affection – but he ended up thinking better of it. "This is getting sappy," he sighed, rolling his eyes and popping another hand-sized cloud of cotton candy into his mouth.

Maybe it was, and although Sam could go on for ages with his praise and affection, Tommy still didn't seem a hundred percent comfortable with it all. He respected that.

"Could I have your attention please?"

A voice suddenly boomed above the noise, and the crowds began to drift towards the castle itself. Above the sea of heads, horns and pointed ears, King Eret stood on a stone parapet, a microphone clutched in his hand that was not unlike the redstone one that was used in Manberg's era – and consequently New L'Manberg's after that. It seemed that the entire festival had stopped in favour of listening to the monarch, and so did Sam and Tommy's previous conversation.

"Should we join them?" Sam asked.

"Too many people," Tommy replied. "Let's stay here. We can see anyways."

Sam secretly wondered if Tommy's hesitation was due to an unfamiliar exhaustion or a fear of being recognized. However, he soon realized that it was highly unlikely when the boy began to devour his sixth candy cane of the day. He sighed. "I knew all that sugar was a mistake," he tutted.

"Shut up," Tommy retorted, taking a particularly big bite in response to the warden's disapproval. *"You let me get them."*

Again, Eret's voice echoed around the stone walls, and they fell silent again, listening.

"Thank you all for coming," Eret began, and was met with a general mumble of approval. Even from further away, Sam could still see a smile stretch his face. *"As you all know, this festival has been months in the making, and I couldn't have done it without all of you."* He stretched his arm out to the crowd in front of him. *"Your talents, cultures and nations have all had a part in influencing this, and that is what makes it so special. This*

festival, unlike its unfortunately much more bloody predecessors, is a true celebration of diversity, freedom and unity."

The crowd clapped, and so did Sam. "He's a good speaker," Tommy said through another mouthful of sugar. "Lengthy and sometimes boring, but a fucking good one anyway." Sam was inclined to agree with him.

"However, before the festivities continue, I have been charged with the deeply saddening task of passing on a snippet of tragic news."

The people began to mumble among themselves, the droning reaching the warden's ears. Puzzled, he listened closely, and noted how only a handful of attendees stayed silent. They were the ones in the warm, light brown winter clothes and the tartan scarves. Snowchester. He wondered why, but it seemed that he didn't have long to wait for an answer.

"It has been brought to my attention that Snowchester has just lost a dear and important member of their society." Eret's voice trembled ever so slightly, and Sam's concern for the eventual news began to grow. The king coughed, and continued speaking. *"But he was not only an inhabitant of that said nation. He was a visionary, a leader, and a friend to all."*

"Get on with it," Tommy muttered. "I'm running low on gumdrops..."

"A few mornings ago, President Tubbo passed away."

The gathering froze. Sam's breath hitched in horror. That was it. That was all that was said. No cause of death, no continuation of the eulogy. Just a crowd-wide, shocked silence. The Snowchester citizens bowed their heads further. The rest of the nations glanced at each other briefly. The old L'Manbergians were rooted to the spot, by devastation or the crippling horror of what they had just heard.

Eret called for a respectful minute of silence a moment afterwards, but it was clear that it wasn't needed. No one had dared utter a word for what felt like ages.

Sam was no exception. He didn't even feel himself react or express anything. A white sheet, that's what he was. Blank. Devoid of feeling. The shock took a while to sink in. His first thoughts snapped back into his brain.

Puffy.

He peered into the crowd, trying to pick her out among everyone else. She wasn't there. Guilt ate him out as he remembered their fight. A hypocrite. That's what he called her, and only because she loved her son. A son she had kept discreet and hidden from her friends, but her son nonetheless. The pain others were feeling would be nothing compared to the captain's agony. A mother's sorrow. It was something Sam could only imagine, and even then would never begin to fathom the true extent of how excruciating it could be.

He didn't have any children of his own. How could he know?

Tommy.

He faced the boy by his side, and immediately clutched his hand. "Tommy?"

Tubbo was his best friend. The boy would be in tears, or at least, he should have been. Tommy just looked... numb. He stared straight at Eret. "I... I don't get it..." He looked up at the warden with glistening eyes. "He's kidding, right...? Tubbo can't... He..."

"Tommy..." Sam tried to pull him into his arms, but the boy wriggled out of his grasp.

Tommy jumped up from the ground, his limbs shaking. "He's not... He can't be..." He let out a breathy laugh. "This is Tubbo we're talking about! He... can't be gone. He can't be dead..."

Sam didn't know what to say, or how to react. He stayed completely still, his tongue tied.

"He can't be dead, Sam."

Silence. Eret's words were still worming their way into Sam's brain. He himself was still coming to terms with the unexpected announcement, which explained why he was acting a lot more composed than the young boy was.

Tommy was frantic. "SAM!"

"I don't know!" he yelled back, immediately dropping his tone when the boy froze in fright. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout."

"Tubbo can't be gone..." The boy was staring down at his arm. Sam wondered why, until Tommy turned as white as a sheet.

"Tommy?" The warden stared at him. When he got no reply, he tried to get him to sit down again, his worry only growing with each passing moment. "We'll get you home and rested. Save your strength." What else was he supposed to say? Sam himself didn't know how to deal with his own grief, let alone one that came as a sudden shock to a kid who had quite literally met death face to face.

There was one last moment where everything stayed still. Then it all came crashing down and smashed like paper-thin glass. Before Sam could react and catch him, Tommy bolted off, his red cloak flying out behind him. His long legs carried him far and fast, and he was out of sight by the time the warden scrambled to his feet. "TOMMY!" He tried to call him back, a familiar dread rising within him.

Eret's voice rose again. *"Thank you all for coming, again, and I apologise for darkening the atmosphere. We should all go back to having the time of our lives. After all, it's what Tubbo would have done."*

Tommy was never much of an actor. Anyone could have told him that. When he would feign anger at a comment or action, one look his way would bring a curve to the corners of his lips and, a few minutes later, a series of loud and breathy laughs as the loose mask was dropped. He couldn't help it. Lying came with the same issues, and he knew he wasn't always believed even when he managed to control himself.

But in those days since he was brought back, Tommy had kept up the biggest act of his life.

He had been struck down with a sickness that bogged down his lungs and his throat. Sam barely left his side, taking relentless care of him and his weak body. The silent hours where he'd close his eyes in an attempt to catch a few winks of sleep allowed him to mull over his thoughts as they slowly came back.

They were frightening.

So he decided to lie. He lied about his afterlife limbo, turning the cold, black void it really was into a scene he picked out from one of Techno's mythology books. He lied about Wilbur's fleeting presence within it: he never left Tommy alone, leaving behind trails of dread at every clammy, ghostly touch and every flourished turn of phrase.

When Sam touched him with all the softness Tommy used to love, his insides would churn and made him want to fight back with a sneer. His body and his mind still bore the scars of his death, some fainter than others.

"I'm fine," he kept telling the warden with the brightest grin he could muster. He was pretending, acting, lying every step of the way.

The revival process had been more than just "a bitch". It was the most agony-inducing, horrifying length of time he had ever gone through. He would have rather broken all the bones in his body or drown in his own blood than experience that pain again. He would have rather stayed dead.

The only time he had been sincere was when he set foot in the festival. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he felt happy. Genuinely happy. He could forget his past and what was to come, concentrating only on the moment, the precious gift called the present that part of him still missed. He finally got to see Sam as someone other than another adult who cared for him out of mindless pity, only to backstab him at a later date. He got to appreciate things he never got the chance to before, such as the other wonders redstone could make. He only knew of doors, defensive systems and war machinery. A small part of him also began to forgive Eret, at least a little. All of that fell apart when Tommy heard the news.

Tubbo. Sweet, sweet Tubbo.

Brave Tubbo.

Loyal Tubbo.

Tubbo who always stuck by Tommy's side through thick and thin. The one who was forced to exile him, but who still forgave him and welcomed him back. The one Tommy was prepared to give his life for in a heartbeat.

Their fight before Tommy's final visit to Pandora's Vault was loud and brutal. It was the first time that Tommy realized he was on the losing side of an argument, but it wasn't the last time that he argued on despite that. He was being selfish and whiny, bringing down his best friend who managed to build a life. In all honesty, he was jealous, and ashamed of himself: his trust issues were plenty, remains of the numerous betrayals he had been forced to live through. The only one stopping him settling into a new life was himself.

Once he came back, alive but sick, and his dark thoughts began to take over, he distracted himself by promising that he would go and apologize to Tubbo as soon as he could. Now he was never going to.

Tommy ran away, pushing down the tears that had started to form in the corner of his eyes. He rushed out of the castle, and along the walls until he reached the rounded base of one of the towers, far from the eyes of the crowds. The murky waters of the moat sat a few feet underneath him. He sank down against the wall, bringing his knees up to his chest.

Tubbo was gone, and although he couldn't know for sure, Tommy was certain he was the one who killed him.

"Now, I need you to think carefully about whose life you want to take."

Tommy looked down at his arm. His fourth life was still there, bright and beating. Or rather, Tubbo's final life was still there, stolen by a selfish, greedy boy who held too many grudges – even, supposedly, in death. He rubbed at it. He scratched it. He pinched it. He tried to rip it off until his skin went raw. It stayed, to his dismay. His reddened skin began to sting him, and he was instantly flung back into the memories of his afterlife.

Not only those of Wilbur's smile in the black void – the game of solitaire laid out before his crossed knees and his words of pure insanity spoken so calmly – but also of himself. His ghost. The red phantom that he had become.

The hate towards Tubbo in his final moments of death terrified him, and he let a string of uttered curses fly from his mouth. He tried scratching at the life again. He wanted to rip it off and give it back to its owner, desperately. He didn't care if he suffered even more, or if he was flung back into the abyss of the other side. He wanted Tubbo back.

"Shit... Shit, shit, shit..." When the heart still stubbornly refused to come off, he buried his head between his arms, bunching up his fists. "Shit!" He yanked his hood further over his head until his neck was strained and ready to snap.

He screwed his eyes shut. He wouldn't cry. He couldn't. He wouldn't let himself. He wasn't a child any more. He could take care of himself. He was strong. He was... He was...

The pain he felt when Tubbo's second life was ripped from him – at the Red Festival many years ago – filled him once again. Only this time, it was worse. Tommy clenched his teeth until his jaw hurt. He was strong. He wouldn't cry.

But when Sam's voice filled the air again, he realized just how weak he was. "Tommy!" A pair of heavy footsteps finally reached his side, and strong arms wrapped around him. "Don't ever run off like that again! I was worried..."

Tommy didn't move, but he gripped himself tighter when he felt the cold of Sam's armour against him and the warmth of his skin. Both temperatures were so sudden. "I killed him," he whimpered. "I killed Tubbo..."

The generic answer he was expecting came soon after. "No, no you didn't. Tubbo's death had nothing to do with you."

Tommy finally found the strength to push Sam off him. "You're so dumb sometimes! I *killed* him!" Crossing the warden's gaze, he glared into his green and black eyes. They were dumb, just like everything else was. He wanted to gouge them out. Sam gingerly tried to touch him again, and the boy leapt up out of his reach. "Dream was right!" he yelled. "There was a life taken, but it wasn't yours!"

Unfortunately, he added despite himself.

"What do you mean?" The warden looked confused, questioning and wanting an answer.

Tommy angrily wiped his eyes, not being able to hold back his sobs. "I killed Tubbo," he choked. "I took his life..."

Sam stood up next to him. "Calm down Tommy," he said calmly. "You're not well." He pressed a hand to his forehead. "The fever's acting up—"

"Stop!" Tommy shoved him away again, retreating backwards. "Why don't you believe me?"

"Because I don't believe Dream. He could be wrong—"

"Or he could be right!" Trying to get Sam to understand, to stop acting like he knew everything, and get his head out of his ass was exasperating. "He was right about the revival!"

The warden fell silent and Tommy couldn't help but proudly straighten his back. He knew he was right. He knew he shouldn't act so victorious, but he couldn't help it.

"He was right about the revival, and so he was right about the process." He swallowed hard. "I took Tubbo's life..."

"That doesn't make any sense. He's your best friend, why would you even consider doing that?"

"Because I was a dumb ghost!" the boy spat, refusing to take into account Sam's good point. It hit him a moment later like a ton of bricks. "Dream... Dream persuaded me to do it..." The realization turned his sorrow into anger. He turned to Sam. "We need to kill him, now."

"What?"

"We need to kill Dream!" The thought was so sudden, and so plainly obvious. "We go back to the prison, and we slaughter that miserable bastard!"

Sam's reply was not one he expected. "No."

Tommy stopped. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"A no is a no, Tommy." The softness in his manners had turned into a strict and rigid stance, and the boy again found himself faced with the Warden. He bristled.

"After everything he's done? He killed me, Sam—"

"But then he brought you back, and he's proven that the Revival Book was real and works. He's too precious to kill."

"My discs are precious, Sam. Tubbo's life is— was precious. That tyrant is *not*!"

"We need his knowledge, Tommy—"

"It's not worth it!" Tommy suddenly lashed out, tears welling up again. "Revival is not worth it!" All the agony consumed him once more, and his act finally fell apart at the seams. "I would have rather stayed dead..." When Sam's arms tried to hug him again, he slapped them away. "Tubbo's dead, but I don't want him to go through what I did..." Through a wet veil, he looked up at Sam. "It's not worth it. Kill Dream, Sam."

He thought he was convincing. His time in L'Manberg's governments taught him how to speak well and persuade the masses. Getting one man on his side should have been easy, especially if the person in question was always ready to jump to his defence at a moment's notice.

But Sam stayed put. "I can't kill him, Tommy."

That was it. Tommy snapped. "Then I'll kill him! Give me a sword and I'll get rid of him."

"I will not let you into the prison ever again."

"Because I died, right? Who's fault is it really, huh? You failed to do your own fucking job!" He snarled at him. "You're a shit fucking warden, Sam."

"I'm doing my duty. Dream is still locked up—"

"And only because I fucking agreed to it! I thought the book was worth it, and it's not! It was my demand, and now I want it to cease!"

"You're a child, Tommy. You shouldn't have to deal with this and make these decisions."

A child. Of course it had to come at some point. Tommy just never thought Sam would stoop so low. "I was never a fucking child," he spat, furious. He squared up to the warden. "I'm more of a man than you'll ever be."

"Be very careful with what you say, Tommy." The boy then realized that Sam's trident was out, and grasped tightly in his hand.

"Are you going to kill me?" he growled, trying to mask the audible fear in his tone.

"No, I thought you were in danger when you ran off! I care about you Tommy!"

"Yeah, Wilbur and Phil said that too, and look what happened." Their names jabbed his skin like needles, digging deep and painfully into him. "If you cared about me, you would have let me out of that cell!"

"I did what I had to do. If you hadn't—"

"So now you're blaming me for all this shit?" Tommy yelled again. The whole of the Greater SMP must have been able to hear him, and he didn't care. He wanted everyone

to gather around on the opposite side of the moat and watch as he brought down the high and mighty Warden of Pandora's Vault. He wanted a taste of victory again, any victory. He wanted blood.

"Son, please..." The name was clearly a slip of the tongue and unintentional, but it still sent a strange, warm feeling coursing up his body.

Tommy pushed it down as suddenly as it had come up. "I'm not your son," he muttered. "I'm no one's son, and I never will be."

He could have argued further, pressuring Sam to kill the prisoner until he caved in. Then everything could stop and settle down. There would be no more wars, or issues, or crying himself to sleep in fear that the white masked man would steal everything he cared about again. He would have, but Sam was an adult, and his stubbornness was as strong and unmovable as the Vault's obsidian walls. When it suddenly suited him, he refused the boy's demands. He was just like everyone else. He never listened. He didn't care.

"I trusted you, Sam... Now I know you're just like all the other dickheads I want to kill..." He turned around, angry tears finally streaming down his cheeks. "Go to hell."



Just as quickly and surely as everything had righted itself, Sam's life crumbled again

Sam didn't run after Tommy when he left the second time. He didn't try to call him back. He didn't return to the festival. He didn't go back to the Vault. He didn't even go home.

Instead, his feet brought him somewhere else.

A few stories and rumours had popped up in recent years about a special place the lost and the broken wandered to when their burdens became too heavy to carry, and their souls became tainted with darkened spots that slowly swallowed their minds. There was no particular way to get there, and the subconscious took the lead during the journey. The world would fade out, the only company being the troubled thoughts and sinking feelings. During that journey, there was an all time low, a brief moment where the edge of the precipice seemed so close, so real and so inviting. A pause ensued, with a choice to either end it all, or journey on. Few chose to continue.

Those who did were simply driven by the one, fleeting sliver of hope tied around their wrist like the tail of a balloon. They were feeling lucky.

When Sam set foot through the portal and emerged in Las Nevadas, Quackity was already waiting. He didn't know how, and he didn't care. He knew why, and his old business partner seemed to know too. It was a gift they shared. Strange, otherworldly punctuality when it suited them the most.

Big Q gave him a crooked, lopsided smile, and all the animosity that had previously been present during their last interaction had disappeared into thin air. Wordlessly, he led the warden down the Strip. The Casino beckoned.

Sam was soon seated at a long roulette table in a darkened, underground room. Kindred, anonymous souls sat beside him, suffering just as he was, and sometimes more so. No one spoke. A shiny casino chip sat in front of him.

At the head of the table, Quackity raised his hand. A shiny silver ball glinted in his palm. "My friends," he grinned. "Place your bets."

Chapter Forty-Two: An Arm For An Arm

The sun was a burning golden disc high up in the clear blue sky, devoid of all clouds and ever so peaceful. The vegetation all around rustled gently, chiming in the mellow summer breeze. Two butterflies tumbled over the sun-kissed cobblestone road, their brightly coloured wings fluttering in the air.

Everything was blissful and beautiful. It was mockery, torture even.

Iron-clad hooves the size of dinner plates trotted along the road as the thick pelted pony was led towards the desert. Its strong muscles pushed against Puffy's legs as she sat astride, clenching the reins between her hands. Wedged between her and the horse's neck were the two young piglins, simultaneously enchanted and confused by the sudden outing.

Michael turned to the captain. "Where's Tubbo?" he asked.

Puffy gripped the reins tighter, then forced out a reassuring smile before answering. "He's busy," she said, desperately trying to convince both the little one and herself. "Very busy. He couldn't make it today."

"Where are we going?" Michelle piped up.

A still tender part of Puffy warmed when she spoke up, and she forced herself to relax. Michelle and Michael's friendship, although it took a while to finally happen, was flourishing. Michelle's much more talkative state showed that. "It's a surprise," she replied, and the two piglins cheerfully turned back to the road, grunting and chattering away with their theories.

As soon as they could no longer see her, Captain Puffy dropped her act, and retreated back into her sombre mood. Sombre, yes. Not teary.

The idea had come to her a fortnight after Tubbo's untimely... end. The scene itself was still suddenly and violently engraved in her mind; his body going limp in the privacy of her own home, in her own arms. It was a private, intimate affair, and didn't make sense in the slightest.

When help finally arrived after her panic brought her to yell out to the rest of Snowchester, many theories began circulating. A heart attack, some said. A terminal illness that went undiagnosed, others suggested. Even the question of old age was brought up, and just as swiftly ruled out. But the suspicions around Tubbo's death really started when his lives were checked.

"It's... It's gone..." the doctor breathed.

Puffy's frantic pacing stopped when she heard him. "What?"

"His third life isn't there."

"Let me see!" The captain had pushed through the small group that came to help and stared at her son's body. Sure enough, only two hearts remained, the third having disappeared into thin air. That was the most confusing part of it all, and the most tragic. Losing a child was one thing, but the added burden of the unknowing would be enough to crush anyone, and it did.

For a couple of days after, Puffy was inconsolable, and with good reason. The rest of Snowchester was just as shocked, and in-between the dark black banners of mourning draped over each of the cabins and the ramparts, things began to leak out.

In the midst of a tragedy, it seemed the common coping mechanism for the people was to gossip and theorize. Secrets began to see the bright light of day, and questions that had previously been avoided were now openly discussed. Namely, why the captain who lived alone in the windmill at the top of the world was the most distraught. It was only a matter of time until the questions flowed towards her.

A long time ago, Captain Puffy would have lied and hidden the truth. However, now she finally let every wound and every mistake out in the open for all to see.

Tubbo was her son, and she loved him more than life itself.

She expected backlash and follow-up inquiries, but she was surprised. The commune's inhabitants offered their condolences, especially the parents who could never fathom the pain burying a child must bring. A surprising number of people merely smiled sadly, their suspicions finally being confirmed after so much speculation dragged out over the years since she first set foot on the shores of the Greater SMP.

Tears flowed, but not for long. One day, a thought wormed her way into her mind, and stayed there for a while. It was meaningless at first, and what only seemed to be a futile attempt at denying her son's death, but as she kept thinking, a small part of her started to realize that it wasn't as insane as she first thought. The sadness turned into slivers of hope that weaved together a blanket of confidence and determination, strengthened by a mother's undying love.

Now here she was; finally acting on her whim and idea. A sinking sense of anxiety still lingered as she travelled on, but she tried to keep her chin up.

Finally, the cobbles gave away to soft sandstone, and Puffy spurred her steed forward. The careful trotting turned into a gentle canter, and the captain veered away from the city. Instead, she headed the horse off into the desert. She followed a beaten track set with squares of quartz, lapis-lazuli and granite that was partially submerged by sand-drifts, carried over the dunes by the hot breezes. The sun's rays turned from soft to harsh, bringing down a sweltering heat wave upon the travellers. The two piglins seemed to rejoice in it, but the sheep and the horse were suffering with their thick fleece and hairs. The desert trek felt much longer than it actually was, and although she was suffering and sweating in abundance, Captain Puffy kept her gaze focused on a looming building in the distance.

The Temple of The Undying.

It was her only hope.

Tubbo's only hope.

Reaching the base of the structure, she finally felt the sheer power of the two towers, stretching their long shadows out across the glittering sand dunes. Mountains of offerings piled up at their feet – silks, food, jewels and even live animals. They cascaded down onto the desert floor, creating a river of riches unlike anything any of them had ever seen. The two piglins in particular seemed enchanted by the golden items, their eyes wide and greedy. Puffy didn't bring an offering. Instead of praying for an answer, she was going to ask for one outright.

She dismounted and helped the little ones down, before leading both them and the horse through the temple's threshold. The colourful hieroglyphics set with precious stones seemed to be watching them as they passed, and the captain held her breath. Michael and Michelle remained remarkably quiet during the whole ordeal, keeping close and as alert as lookouts. Framed by the high-ceilinged entrance, a courtyard was soon visible, watched over by a proud-looking statue of a sphinx.

Abruptly, two guards dressed in nothing but loincloths and leopard skins blocked their way, their spears aloft and sweat beads trickling down their bare chests.

At first startled, Puffy soon regained her composure and spoke. "I'm here to see Foolish," she said.

"No mortals are allowed beyond this point," one of the soldiers warned, forcing the visitors backwards with a sharp jab of their weapon.

The piglins cowered behind the captain, but she stayed put. "I'm here to see Foolish," she repeated firmly. "He knows me."

"No mortals are allowed to–"

"Stand down." A loud, booming voice suddenly interrupted the soldier, and they both spun around.

A giant man began to stride towards them from further away in the courtyard, only to get smaller and smaller as he got closer. Now shrunken, he still towered over everyone else present, but in a much less daunting and freakish way. Bright, shiny golden skin caught the sun rays, creating an aura around his body that was partially covered by his richly adorned robes of the purest white. The silvery-blue, tough hide of a shark trailed out behind him, its sharp and perfect teeth framing his jet-black hair and dazzling emerald eyes.

He stopped in front of the guards, gently ushering them away, and extended his arms out in a greeting just as warm as the sun-kissed sandstone around them. "Don't mind them," he chuckled. "They're just doing their job."

It felt relaxing to fall back into the reassuring embrace of someone strong and comforting. Puffy missed it dearly, and she savoured the moment.

There were people who managed to make friends or get some to see them as a parental figure, and then there was Puffy. Captain Puffy, whose caring disposition was more than a simple gift, and instead a miraculous blessing. How else would she have managed to get a literal *god* to occasionally and accidentally slip up and call her "mom"?

As she hugged Foolish, she felt the gentle touch of soft, invisible entities brush against her, most likely the spirits he often talked about. They were seemingly unseen by everyone but Foolish himself, and yet were very much present in a supernatural flock around him.

"You're upset."

Puffy looked up and, faced with Foolish's concerned gaze, she affectionately stroked the side of his face and shook her head. "Don't worry about it," she whispered, retreating back into his hug.

She felt a finger duck under her chin and lift her head up to him. The god's eyes were kind, and his smile compassionate. "I don't like seeing you like this," he said, almost bringing her to tears. "And I know you want to ask me something." Tongue-tied, the captain couldn't counter what he was saying. The only thing she could do was spurt out the truth, and she was just about to when Foolish's gaze darted over her shoulder. "Don't look around," he whispered into her ear, humoured. "But I think we're being watched."

Following his gaze, Puffy's eyes landed back on the two children she had dragged along with her. Both of them were clinging on to each other, their wide, curious gazes turned up to the scene in front of them and the god that towered over them. Foolish let go of Puffy and bent down to the piglins' level. Michelle let out a little whimper and edged behind Michael, who bravely tried to square up despite his shaking body.

Puffy watched as Foolish smiled at them, and lowered his hood. "Don't be afraid," he chuckled. "I'm not going to eat you."

"Sharks eat people," Michael grunted, finding his voice.

The god laughed again. "You're right, they do. But I won't let them do anything to you, I promise." He glanced back at Puffy. "Or your mother will kill me."

"She's not my mother. I don't know why my dads went."

The captain watched the golden-skinned god hesitate momentarily, and waited until he addressed her again. "Puffy?"

She sighed, and lowered her gaze. "That's what I need to talk to you about," she replied, starting to regret her decision.

"You want me to bring Tubbo back."

"Yes." The captain looked down, the tips of her ears burning in shame.

The temple's living quarters were as grand and splendid as those of a palace. Her and Foolish had taken seats on a polished sandstone bench, out of the sun's heat. Their shade was provided by the high ceilings above them, surrounding a square, inner courtyard exposed to the desert's hot sun. Tall palm trees swayed in the corners, in time with the gentle breeze that billowed the thin white drapes hanging from the pillars. Facing out, they watched the children play.

After some gentle coaxing, Michael and Michelle had been introduced to Foolish's own children, whose complexions were just as shining and golden as their father's. Their names were Junior and Finley, and Puffy remembered the time when they were still little babies. How time flew by – or rather, how quickly gods grew. It only took a couple of minutes for all four of the wide-eyed, shy little ones to get properly acquainted with one another, and were now happily running around the courtyard and playing a strange variation of tag too complex for the adults to understand.

With regret, Puffy soon reminded herself that it was the first time she got to see a scene like it, as a parent. It made her realize how much time she truly lost with Tubbo, and the desire to bring her son back stronger than ever. The only thing she had to do was persuade Foolish, which was much easier said than done.

The god sighed. "I admire your love as a mother, Puffy," he said. "But—"

She cut him off immediately, clutching his white robes. "Foolish, I will get down on my knees and beg. I will sacrifice whatever I need to. This is the only thing I'll ever ask of you." Her grip tightened. "Please."

Foolish turned to her, and his piercing emerald gaze softened. "I wish it was that easy, I really do."

Puffy's heart sank, and it seemed that her painful journey and yearning would be in vain. "They don't call you the God of the Undying for nothing," she reminded him in a last, desperate attempt.

Foolish's expression darkened, and he raised his gaze to the golden symbols carved into the ceiling. Puffy followed his gaze. "Did you know," he began. "That in the Old World, the ankh represents eternal life." He traced the symbol in question, and Puffy nodded. "That doesn't mean that we gods have the authority to provide that immortality."

"I'm not asking you to make him live forever," the captain said. "I just want him to have another chance after it was ripped away from him. Nothing more."

She waited a long time for another answer. Every passing second felt like years, and every one brought her morale down further and further, until rock bottom was just within touching distance.

Abruptly, Foolish stood up. "Come with me," he said, holding out his hand.

Puzzled, Puffy took the hint, and stood up herself. After leaving the piglins and Foolish's own children to play under the watchful eye of a kind-hearted priest, she followed the god as he led her through the temple. Every room was as resplendent and just as grand as the next, and the paintings and deep, intricate carvings told legends and stories she had no idea about, but managed to read seamlessly as she passed them. The halls and walls glittered with fine gold and precious gems, casting colourful shadows on the white robes of all who walked over the sandstone tiles. Soldiers stood alert at every doorway, and priests ambled past carrying bowls and pots of offerings, or simply with their heads bowed in deep prayer. When they crossed Foolish's path, they took a moment to kneel down and wait until he walked out of the room in question.

"I don't like it when they do that," the god said, rolling his eyes. "They keep insisting that they're too unworthy to even look at me. Maybe I should consider making a new commandment that ret-cons that stupid assumption..." Despite herself, Puffy smiled.

Their walk took them all the way to the pyramid at the far end of the Temple of The Undying, and Foolish inserted the twisted end of his staff into an ornate crack in the foundations. The building began to shake, and Puffy grabbed his golden arm to steady herself. The heavy sandstone blocks at the foot of the pyramid parted with a creak, revealing a gloomy staircase lit up with rows of flaming torches.

Foolish grabbed the nearest one, and turned to Puffy. "Follow me." They began their descent, and the passage closed behind them.

For an underground set of steps, Puffy noted that they were remarkably dry, and she only had to catch herself twice after she stripped over a couple of them. Foolish led the way, occasionally checking behind him and helping secure the way if Puffy looked unsure. After a while of a silent descent broken only by the dry spitting of the torch in the god's hand, a new entrance beckoned; dark, black, and ominous.

Captain Puffy hesitated, treading carefully. "What is this place?" she asked in a hushed whisper, darting looks into the void. As an answer, Foolish lay a hand on her shoulder and before she could do or say anything, he blew out the torch with an inhuman puff of air.

Some beliefs said that their god created heaven and earth, and that the earth was without form, and void. Darkness was upon the face of the deep, and their gods moved upon the face of the waters. They said; "Let there be light", and there was light.

Puffy had never known how spectacular that single, first sentence of multiple religions' creations could be, until she experienced it herself.

First, there was darkness; a void, the abyss. Then, by the will of a god, there was light, although it wasn't from the flame this time.

Looking around her with wonderment, she sucked in a breath. The darkness was broken by speckles of emerald green, glittering like stars and staring back at her like eyes. She felt like she was floating through space, the floor beneath her being nothing but a construct she did not touch.

There was a chuckle, and she turned to her left. Another two emerald green stars met her gaze, although these ones were much closer. "It's amazing, isn't it?" His words were followed by the roar of a flame, and the god lit the torch again. Slowly but surely, the cosmos started to fade, but the sight that met Puffy's eyes was just as impressive.

They were standing in a hallway where everything seemed endless, from the ceiling to what lay in front of them. It was surprisingly narrow, only stretching about ten feet wide, but certainly made up for it with the magnitude of the walls. There were no decorations; no ancient symbols, no paintings, and no precious stones. Yet, it was clearly the most decorated place in the temple. Puffy had to step back in order to see even a quarter of what hung on the walls.

A repetitive, linear pattern of hand-sized, brilliant gold figures lined every section of the sandstone, each inset with two emeralds acting as – what Puffy correctly assumed in the dark – eyes. Some shone much, much brighter than others, breaking the linear cycle they were all lined up in, hanging from golden chains. The same, odd pattern of golden figures seemed stretched out way into the darkness beyond, and the glowing spots gave away into another starry void.

The captain couldn't help but crouch down beside the lowest line of the pendants, and stared at one closely in the faint light of the fire. It was a figure, sure, but not realistic by any means. If anything, it resembled one of the winged sprites present on many of the hieroglyphic paintings on the temple walls.

"Totems of Undying," Foolish sighed, crouching next to her. He raised the torch above their heads, lighting up only a small portion of the rest of them. Puffy realized that there must have been hundreds of thousands of them, if not millions upon millions. He grinned. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"I've heard about these," Puffy said, a prime example coming to mind. "Technoblade..." She trailed off, waiting to see if she had to explain who that was. Of course she didn't; Foolish was a god. He knew everything, and the piglin warrior was certainly not someone who would be brushed under the carpet and forgotten in a hurry. "Technoblade used one to cheat his own death at an execution."

"Did he now?" Foolish sounded amused. "That explains why his totem is missing. I couldn't find it."

"*His* totem? What do you mean?"

"This is what I wanted to show you." Puffy was handed the torch, and her friend stood up, gesturing to the world around them. "This is where all the souls after final deaths are kept."

"Souls?" Puffy didn't understand. "But I thought there was... an afterlife, or—"

"Did I ever deny there was?" He grinned, and the captain was only more confused. "Limbos do indeed exist, but are stored in these, that's why no two are the same, but you can meet others in your own. You're not going to have the same limbo as Eret, as an example, but you could still meet and talk to him. He will simply not see the same surroundings as you."

Puffy was about to make a comment about Foolish all but talking about the death of a king and thus committing high treason, but she stopped herself. Again, Foolish was a deity: he'd probably smite anyone sent to execute him. "But how... how are they here?"

"See the glowing eyes?" He pointed out a few, and she nodded. "Those contain the souls of the dead. The unlit ones belong to people who still roam the realm, specifically this one." He gave her a sideways look. "When I came here, I made it my job to contain and protect the spirits of all those who lived and fought on this very land." He gestured to a small cluster of lit totems. "These ones belong to the population of a village that went mad, hundreds of years before your time. They all died in a terrible massacre by the hands of their own. Such a tragedy..."

"And how do you—"

"Contain them?" He winked. "I'm a god, am I not?" A magician never revealed their secrets and neither, it seemed, did gods.

Puffy still had so many more questions. She knew she had a mission on hand, and although she was far from forgetting it, her curiosity demanded to know more about the work Foolish dedicated his immortality to. "What are ghosts then?"

"Fragments of souls that managed to escape their containment," he replied without missing a beat. "That's why only some roam around, and why they have more or less memory loss, like Ghostbur." He must have been reading her life, as Wilbur's ghost was the exact example she had in her mind. "Come on, I have one in particular I need to show you."

He set off, and the captain trotted swiftly to keep up with his gargantuan strides. "Wait," she panted. "What about Techno's totem? How did that work—"

"All in good time." He stopped in front of another section of the wall that looked almost identical to the first. Puffy had no idea how he managed to differentiate between all the totem clones, but that must have been another ability he possessed that she couldn't even fathom the physics of. "Now, take this one." He carefully handled one of the unlit totems. "This was a particularly strange one."

It looked completely normal to Puffy, and she frowned. "How so?"

"The owner died – a young boy taken by a tragedy – and his soul was contained," Foolish went on. "Then, the most extraordinary thing happened about a week ago; the soul just... disappeared!"

"Disappeared?"

"Into thin air! It was as if he had never died in the first place." He paused. "Or, most likely, someone in this small cluster of lands knows how to revive people."

Revival.

Oh my gods...

Sam must have done it. He brushed off Puffy's warnings and pleas, and went along with Tommy's revival. That was the only explanation, it had to be, and... The captain felt sick to her stomach. She stared at the totem. It was Tommy's. It couldn't be anyone else's, and now she had no doubts: Tommy was alive.

She had no idea if she should have been relieved or horrified.

In her dizziness, it took her a while to realize Foolish was still talking, so she focused back on him and listened. "Revival is possible through many ways, including directly through the totems themselves. If I'm not mistaken, that's how Technoblade cheated his death. However, I wouldn't recommend trying the process more than once."

"Why?" the captain asked.

The look she received startled her. Foolish was no longer looking at her as a friend, but rather as an almighty and powerful god, one that had seen many sights too ghastly to mention and who knew the universe like the back of his hand. "Necromancy is a dark power," he warned her, his tone dark and threatening. "It shouldn't be taken lightly. One revival is all the totems bring – and only for a phenomenally good reason – or the consequences would be dire."

The captain gulped, heeding his words. "Why are you showing me all this?"

His gaze and his tone softened. "I'm trying to show you exactly why I'm hesitant to help you," he replied. "Revival is a dangerous business. So many things could go wrong, and–"

"But there's a chance," Puffy pointed out, hopeful once again. "The totems guarantee at least an attempt."

Foolish fell silent. He looked away from her, then back to the wall. Puffy watched as he grabbed one of the amulets just above Tommy's, one whose eyes glittered and shone like two bright, emerald green suns. He paused for a moment, dragging his thumb over the carved indents. It didn't take a genius to know who it belonged to, and the sheep's heart tightened. The pain of her loss shot through her once again. "Foolish, please."

There was another silence, this time brief. "Are you sure you want to do this? If it fails..."

"If there's a glimmer of hope that my son could live again," Puffy said, determined. "Then I want to take it, and everything else be damned."

She watched as Foolish's gaze slowly panned from her to the golden pendant in his palm. He closed his hand around it, then nodded to her.

"Alright," the god finally agreed to the captain's surprised and overwhelming delight. "I'll try."

Havoc was the only way to describe the scene currently taking place in the Greater SMP. No, it wasn't another war, or revolution. It wasn't a stray mob either, or the spawning of an illegal Wither.

It was only a chase, but a brutal one.

Crops were trampled, market stalls were shoved aside, and carts were tipped. Edible wares and other objects tumbled to the floor, tripping up passing people and sending the merchants into an uproar. The rest of the people stared at the two figures that dashed past them.

Sam would have stopped to help clear up the carnage if he wasn't involved in the chase itself. His feet thundered against the ground, and his muscles ached from the endless running. Yet, he still kept his gaze trained on his target, and kept up with his swift pace.

Earlier that day, he finally went home, exhausted and... dead. Or at least, a part of him was, figuratively and literally. He spent a few days in Las Nevadas, and was treated with the highest esteem by Quackity and his other associates, but that did nothing except lower his spirits even more, straight past rock bottom to the void that lay beyond. Even Fran's gentle cuddles did nothing to lighten his mood. Something had snapped within him, something big.

So when he found out that a set of keys had been stolen from his home, he was outraged. They weren't any old keys either: they were a set that used to open Pandora's Vault. *Used to*. After the lockdown, Sam took it upon himself to change all the locks. Although the stolen keys could theoretically no longer open the prison, that didn't make their theft any less aggravating.

Sam had stormed back to the Vault, only to find a hooded figure attempting to jam in one of the said keys into the entrance lock on the mainland. With an enraged shout, he let his presence be known and readied his trident, but the robber was quick and ducked past him.

Now here he was, still chasing after the criminal with enough spite in him to rival Dream himself. With his duty as the warden being the only thing keeping himself somewhat sane, he wouldn't let the theft go unpunished. He was out for blood.

The thief was small and quick, measuring up to only about half of Sam's full height. They darted through, under and over every obstacle with ease and only stopped to turn back and try to block their pursuer's path. Sam had never jumped over so many barrels and upturned carts before, but he still never broke his sprint. He peered at the hooded figure, trying desperately to figure out their identity, only for a veil of red rage to descend in front of his vision and give him a new burst of energy.

The erratic manhunt continued for a while afterwards and finally, Sam began to tire. He tripped a lot more and his vision became blurry and blurrier. He was close to collapsing and so, it seemed, was the thief.

King Eret's palace soon came into view, along with the garrisons that patrolled the outer walls. The festival decorations were being rolled up at last, and the Badlands' flag had been lowered. The robber hesitated for a moment, before attempting to duck into the nearby woods. If they managed to escape in between the trees, the warden would have no chance of catching them. He was not going to let that happen. It only took a hot second for Sam to react. He snatched a bow from a nearby soldier and a single arrow from their quiver. In one, swift flourish, he took his aim and fired.

There was a moment of silence as the arrow sailed through the air, and a loud thud as the thief was struck down from behind. Thrusting the bow back to its owner, the warden rushed to the scene and towered over his prey.

A dark puddle had started soaking the perpetrator's cloak, originating from the arrow sticking out of them like a needle in a pincushion. With no mercy, Sam ripped it out and tossed it aside, before rolling over the body and ripping down the mask that covered their face. He froze.

The hostility that had taken hold of him disappeared, and he was left with a heavy head and stomach full of dread. In front of him – with glassy eyes and a trickle of blood running out of his mouth – was an old friend he hadn't expected to see.

Ponk.

Immediately, Sam let go of the body, and took a step back. His eyes were glued to him, and he held his breath. He hadn't expected to see Ponk that day, let alone... let alone...

I killed him.

Whispers reached his ears, and they didn't belong to the Egg. Looking around, Sam watched as a crowd began to form around the scene, whispering and muttering among themselves. Stares of all kinds were thrown Sam's way, and he couldn't pretend to ignore them. One or two onlookers leaned forward and tried to get a better look at the thief's identity.

Immediately, Sam blocked their view and drew a fold of the cloak over Ponk's face. He then picked the considerably smaller man up into his arms. "Go away," he growled at the people closing in around him. When they didn't, he decided to threaten them. "Or I'll lock you in the Vault with Dream!"

That seemed to deter any further advancements, and the onlookers began to disperse, letting the warden through. He picked up his pace, darting wary and menacing looks to everyone he caught the eye of, and he felt his chest constrict again. The familiar stench of gunpowder filled his nostrils again. The impending sensation of explosion his creeper side held only started coming back the past two weeks or so, after so many years of Sam managing to keep it at bay. He knew nothing would happen, as his mostly human physiology wouldn't allow it, but the feeling was still daunting and uncomfortable.

His temper became shorter and shorter by the day, and his thoughts darker and darker. The single game of roulette he played in Las Nevadas did nothing to help his mood, and now having lost a life to it himself, he couldn't understand how desperate people could find any fulfilment in participating.

He didn't know how much treason could truly hurt until he had gone through multiple rounds of it. First Ranboo, then Puffy, then Tommy. Ponk was the straw that broke the warden's back. He hadn't expected to see Ponk today. He hadn't expected to kill him either. And he definitely didn't expect Ponk to betray him as he did.

But if the thief wanted to play that game with him, Sam would go all the way. And for once in his burdened, miserable life – by the gods! – he intended to win.

There was a strange, mutual admiration between Ponk and Sam. Sam often said that he liked Ponk's humour, his pranks and his witty banter. Ponk himself was in awe of the other's physical attributes and his engineering skills, although he was too stubborn and shy to admit it to his face.

Back in the beginning, when Sam came along to join the seven other settlers, Ponk had immediately taken a liking to and made sure to spend most of his time with him, offering to help carry something heavy that Sam was clearly managing quite well on his own or spending hours down in the mines helping him look for redstone ore. There was something about his presence that made Ponk feel safe and loved. That was new for a pickpocket who had spent most of his life scampering through the dusty, slimy alleys of crowded, stinking cities and spending rough nights on the floors of cold jail cells and wet cobbles. His arrival on the land of the SMP was meant to be a new start away from laws, and it was, for a time. Sam made him feel special.

Ponk liked the young and reckless, golden haired, blue eyed man he first met, and his absence and subsequent return as a strong, stoic, intelligent warrior who now bore the marks of a creeper only made his affection for him grow. Ponk was the first to welcome him back with the tightest, rib-crushing hug his body had the strength of giving him, burying his head into the other's chest and inhaling the gentle scent he had been craving throughout Sam's seemingly endless years of absence.

Sam had embraced him back. "I take it that I was sorely missed," he chuckled.

Missed was too little a word for what Ponk felt during those years that Sam was away. His thoughts never wavered, and when all his other friends gave up hope that the

traveller would ever return, Ponk knew better. He was right, and he was ready to make sure that Sam would never leave ever again. He didn't think his heart could take it.

Their friendship picked up where it had been left after being paused for six years or more. Nothing had changed, if only the insistence in Ponk's behaviour so Sam would never leave. This insistence took many forms, but the most notable was a shift in their interactions. Playful jokes became playful flirting and at first, Sam would laugh nervously and divert his gaze, cover his face and try to focus on something other than the rising blush in his cheeks that Ponk took note of.

However, eventually, the rosy pink compliments and suggestive teasing became a mutual occurrence, although it never evolved beyond that point.

Ponk wished it had. His confession had slipped out one fine day when he and Sam were busy helping a local farmer clean up their citrus orchard. He was carrying a basket of lemons in his arms and Sam was pruning the branches above.

"What would you do if I said I loved you? I mean, *really* loved you?" Sam had paused, and Ponk held his breath, suddenly regretting saying what he had. He watched carefully as his friend stroked the leaves absent-mindedly, his expression indecipherable. "I'm sorry," Ponk rushed to apologize, trying to hide his face behind the mound of lemons in his arms. "I shouldn't have said that—"

"Hey, look at me." Sam glanced down at him with a small smile. "Don't worry about it."

Slightly more relieved, Ponk realized that Sam still hadn't answered his burning question. "But what would you do if I did?"

"I..." Sam faltered, and turned away. There was a darkness in his eyes that Ponk would never forget. "I don't know."

That was the last time either of them mentioned the incident, and their respective lives continued. That didn't mean Ponk had moved on.

Not in the slightest.

The world he came to after everything had faded to black was a dizzy one, and loud too. Groggy eyes belonging to an even groggier body slumped against a wall opened, hitting the bearer with a disturbing, black world. Coming to his senses, he suddenly became aware of the heaviness of his muscles, and the frozen wall pushing

against the back of his head. A sticky patch soaked his back and when he touched it out of pure curiosity, a sharp pain shot through him. Looking at his fingers, the unmistakable crimson red of his own blood stared back.

The crimson...

The Egg filled his ears again, jeering and chanting. This time, however, Ponk didn't find it funny or endearing. He was too confused to focus on it.

Where was he?

What happened?

What was that loud noise that throbbed inside his head?

The sharp, cool sound of sharpened metal was loud enough to burst his eardrums, but his hands were too weak to reach up and cover them. Instead, all he could really do was watch, stare carefully into the darkness and wait. As his vision came to, he let his head roll back. The ceiling stared back, a void devoid of stars or light of any sort. The walls seemed to be closing in. It was clammy. The ground was soaking his legs through his trousers and he shivered. Purple goo dripped onto his dark skin from in-between cracks and from slimy sacks that he couldn't see. All of it was humid, and uncomfortable.

The ear-piercing sound dragged on, and he finally dragged his gaze into the distance. Sitting a few steps away from him, shrouded by the shadows of the wall he sat against, a green and golden figure was busy sharpening a blade. The room beyond them seemed endless, a valley of obscurity that stretched out far beyond his own eyesight. He couldn't tell what the weapon in the figure's hands was, but he immediately recognized the warrior himself.

A burst of hopeful adrenaline shot through Ponk's system and he leapt up in a flash, and rushed towards him. He was so desperate to escape the aching in his body and the frightened state he was in because of his unknown surroundings, and the figure was the key. "SAM!"

Abruptly, he was yanked backwards and lost his balance. His knees scraped the hard, rough floor. His wrists burned and his arms were almost ripped out of their sockets. He shot a look behind him. Heavy metal chains restrained his movements, linked to beefy shackles tightly locked around his wrists, ankles and looped through an iron chain in the wall behind him. He tried pulling again, only to be tugged back again. His scraped knees stung, and he forced himself to try and stand again.

A cold sweat began to trickle down his forehead, and he finally let the reality of where he was sink in. The chains, the darkness, and Sam.

"You're in Pandora's Vault."

Ponk froze. Sam's voice was cold and even, like a flat blade of ice. Gone was the warmth and the gentleness of his tone Ponk was so accustomed to. All that was left was a shadow, a shell. A chill ran up his spine.

"Of course, I'm sure you already knew that." Ponk watched as Sam stood up and turned to him. In the low light emitting from who knows where, he held his breath as he saw the blade in all its glory. A sword. A long, silver and dangerously sharp sword. Ponk couldn't help but glance around for the warden's usual trident. He finally found it, leaning against a wall further away. The red vine Ponk had graciously tied to it was still there. Or was it a red ribbon now? He couldn't tell.

"Sam..." His throat burned him, and he coughed.

A rough finger jabbed his chin, and all but snapped his head upwards. Sam's eyes stared back, full of a hostility and hatred Ponk had never seen in anyone other than Dream before. "Why do you look so scared?" the warden tutted. "You wanted to get into the prison, didn't you? Well, here you are, and it looks like you didn't need these after all."

Something jangled violently in front of his eyes, and through his hazy gaze, Ponk's stomach tied itself into knots as he recognized the ring of keys he had borrowed that same day. Borrowed? Who was he kidding: he stole them, and there was nothing more to it. "I..." Sam had every right to be angry at him, and the manhunt that had ensued was more than expected and deserved, but... "Maybe chaining me up is a little harsh...?"

"The only reason you could have ever wanted to steal those keys was to do something malicious to the prison and let Dream out." Sam's grip on him tightened and for the first time, Ponk was afraid of him. "I won't let that happen."

Ponk still forced himself to roll his eyes and sigh. "Yeah, me and Dream were friends once!" He shrugged. "We all were! That doesn't mean I want to see him escape!"

The warden glared at him, and said nothing. His vicious eyes told the thief more than enough.

"Don't you think this is going to far?" Ponk finally started to argue. "You've gone through all this trouble to do this to me—" He raised up his shackled wrists. The wound in his back still stung him. "— and for what? The prison is corrupting you, Sam! It's taken over your mind!" As soon as he mentioned it, his heart sank and he braced for the upcoming reprimand.

He expected the warden to lash out once again, or plunge the sword in his hand through his heart. Instead, he crouched down to Ponk's height, his eyes still ablaze. "Why did you steal the keys?" he growled.

"Because they were there." That was a lie, and Sam seemed to know it too.

The warden leaned forwards, his warm breath right by Ponk's ear. There was nothing caring or romantic about it when he did, but the thief still allowed himself to relax a little. "I know you're lying to me," Sam hissed. "But I'm prepared to stay here for as long as it takes until you tell me the truth."

Every single bit of treatment Ponk was getting was harsh, and nothing seemed to remain of the man he once fell in love with. Yet the warm, comforting proximity felt familiar. Ponk lay his head on Sam's collarbone, against the cool golden armour. His pain started to dissipate. "Getting to spend time with you ain't that bad, eh?" he whispered with a small chuckle, unknowing whether he was attempting to comfort himself or Sam. Sam's nails sharply dug into his arm and he pulled away. Ponk yelped, tears welling in his eyes. "Why are you so angry?" he pleaded to know in a sudden and different change of tone. "The keys don't even work! What's so wrong about me having them?"

"Your intentions behind them." The warden's grip was close to drawing blood. "I found you trying to get into the prison."

"I wasn't going to do anything!"

"That's what they all say."

Ponk searched the warden's face, particularly his eyes. This wasn't Sam. This roughness, this icy cold character was *not* him. The Egg was the only explanation, as the vines creeping under his clothes and over his own skin reminded him. He knew from the start that Sam's connection wasn't as deep as the others' were, and he was disappointed. Ponk too was reluctant to listen to the Egg at first but after succumbing once to its mercy, he had no idea how he had managed to live without it. The Egg had promised him something too: Sam's unrequited, unfiltered affection. It hadn't come, not

yet, but surely it was only a matter of time. Now, Ponk was searching his face for the traces of that deeper, rooted indoctrination, explaining the sudden change in Sam's behaviour. When he couldn't find it, he spoke again. "Why is the Egg making you do this to me?" Ponk had been loyal to it all this time, all for the promise of the warden's love. Why would it turn against him for his exemplary servitude?

Sam's next sentence shut down that possibility... thankfully? Unfortunately? Ponk didn't know any more. "I am doing this out of my own, free will."

Now Ponk wished that the Egg was involved more than ever. His voice cracked. "What happened to you, Sam...?"

The warden suddenly broke down, tears streaming down his face and he began to beg for Ponk's forgiveness, opening up about his burdens and begging for a second chance. Ponk gave it to him with no more questions asked, and the two of them shared a longing kiss they had both been craving for years.

Except none of that ever happened.

Instead, Sam's reply was a lot more chilling. "Love makes you weak, and I can't have that, not any more." He took a step back. "Why did you try to break into the prison?"

"To see you!" Ponk finally blurted out, immediately regretting it.

He'd get no sympathy in return, and he was right. Sam's eyes covered him with a hard stare. "There," he snarled. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Ponk lowered his gaze, and refused to reply. If Sam was right and love did make you weak, then he was far past the point of no return. A single push would shatter him completely.

"Now, there's still the matter of your punishment."

Ponk's head snapped up. Punishment?

"Of course, did you think I'd let you off so easily for betraying my trust and the Vault's protocols?"

"Sam...?" He didn't even need to ask any more. He knew exactly what was awaiting him. If the warden no longer held a single shred of mercy in his body, there could only be one outcome. Ponk would welcome it with open arms.

"Maybe I'll just take..."

My life, and my heart.

"...one of your arms."

What. It was abrupt, and quite odd. Ponk stared at Sam for a few more moments, awaiting the actual sentence. When it never came, the tiny bit of optimism he still had kicked in, and he laughed. "Pfff, Sam..." he chuckled, forcing himself to make his eyes water. "You're joking, right?" Absolute silence followed his question, and he calmed down immediately. "Sam?"

The warden stayed completely still, then suddenly strode back towards Ponk and yanked his left hand up with such force that it popped right out of its socket. Ponk screamed, and Sam still kept his arm up in the air, straining the frail muscles and the nerves, making the victim cry.

Eyes watering from tears other than the fakes one of joy he forced himself to push out and woozy from the pain, Ponk tried to cross the warden's gaze. Sam looked straight in front of him, anywhere but at the struggling thief underneath him. "SAM! That's my arm!" Ponk sobbed, feebly trying to untangle himself from the chains binding him and slide his wrist out of the clammy gloved hand that held it.

"You have another one."

Out of the corner of Ponk's eye, he watched as the sharpened sword was raised. Panic filled his whimpers and his pleas for clemency. "Sam, don't please—"

"The punishment fits the crime, or so they say."

With those final, horrifying words, the blade came crashing down, and the Vault's walls were once more soiled by blood.

Ponk had no idea how much time had passed once he blacked out from the excruciating pain. All he knew was that he was violently manhandled and thrown out of the prison soon after. The cold, rough sand of the beach scratched his cheek and the palm of his hands.

Or rather, single hand.

Groggily, he managed to push himself up onto his knees and, ignoring the bitterly cold wind and the roaring of the ocean waves behind him, he risked a look to his side.

A miserable stump now bled where his left arm had once been, crudely and carelessly bandaged up by red-stained strips of linen. A trail of dark crimson blood speckled the sand back towards the prison's mainland entrance, marking the path Sam had taken with Ponk's limp body hanging like a rag-doll over his shoulder. From the way he was unceremoniously dumped on the sand, so close to the tumultuous sea, it was clear that the warden didn't care if the thief survived his remaining lives or not.

Ponk wished that he hadn't. Struggling to get to his feet, he felt an uncomfortable sensation trickle over him. At first, he thought it was more blood, until he glimpsed the little tendrils the Egg had so graciously bestowed upon his body and started to sneak out of his mutilated shirt sleeve. The thorns and stems wound together in graceful harmony, weaving something long and strong that Ponk couldn't quite make out at first, until he counted five fingers and an elbow.

When the Egg's work was done, he dropped to his knees again, bowing low. He mumbled praises and thanks too quietly for anyone to hear, except perhaps the Egg itself.

The Egg was there for him, Sam wasn't.

The Egg hadn't hurt him, Sam had.

The Egg was eternal, Sam wasn't.

Balling up his new fist, Ponk began to mutter incoherent ramblings to himself. The desperation he felt beforehand melted into a piping hot mess of anger and spite, and Sam's name that once slipped so beautifully off his tongue now left behind a poisoned aftertaste as he cursed his very existence. The Egg loved him, and had shown that on multiple occasions. Sam didn't, and now Ponk finally knew it.

All of a sudden, there was one person in the realm that Ponk hated more than Dream, and the Egg promised him justice.

Chapter Forty-Three: Another Chance

Foolish did far more than "try", at least from Captain Puffy's point of view.

He spent a day or so locked in a private room of the pyramid, and was only seen by very few. Even Puffy was left to aimlessly wander the temple's halls with nothing but her troubled doubts and second thoughts on her mind. She talked to the priests, got to know the soldiers and spent time with the children, but the impending revival kept her awake and waiting, worried. What if this was a mistake? What if she was getting her hopes up, once again?

Eventually, the fear grew to the point of making her sick, and she shared her doubts with Foolish. She caught him just as he was coming back from a series of secretive hours locked up in the pyramid. "What's happening? Is everything alright?" When he didn't answer immediately, she panicked. "I'm sorry, this was a stupid idea! I was wrong! Tubbo's not going to come back, is he? He's not—"

"Puffy!" He caught her shoulders, and she looked up. He was smiling, but she could feel a sense of worry radiate from him. "Calm down. I'm just making sure I know what I'm doing before we attempt it."

"We only get one try," she mumbled, in an attempt to provide an explanation for her concerns, but also to hide the ashamed blush that had reached the tips of her ears.

"And that's why I'm making sure it'll work. It takes a lot of preparation."

She wanted to believe his words and calm herself, but she knew that would be impossible. She couldn't until she saw Tubbo again, alive and well and, hopefully, back in her own arms. She kept probing Foolish for more details regarding the "preparation" but the god wouldn't divulge anything, to her frustration. He did however promise to tell her when the revival itself would take place, and she began to count down the hours.

It still took a couple more days before one of the priests informed Puffy that she was awaited by Foolish, and she felt her heart leap into her throat. She made her way over to the pyramid as swiftly as she could and stood at its foot, her eyes blinded by the glare of the golden cap at the top. She waited for what seemed like hours.

At first, she stood eagerly to attention, her eyes glued to one of the many doorways that led into the structure. Then, she began to tire and worry, pacing the length of the sandstone. Finally, she collapsed and sat against the warm rocks, basking in the desert sun and anxiously waiting for any sign of Foolish. She let her gaze wander to the long, empty courtyard facing out from the pyramid, at the sphinx statue's behind and the entrance that lay beyond it. The soldiers looked like mere specks in the distance, as did the countless number of devoted folk who lived among the sand dunes. They

placed their offerings, prayed in silence, then attempted to peek into the Temple of The Undying only to be ushered away a second or so later.

The captain hoped that their wishes and dreams would be answered soon, or at the very least heard. What did they pray for? What was so important that they were willing to give up a part of their material riches to a god they hadn't even seen before, who stayed confined to the Temple with his family? A wave of guilt washed over her as she realized that she was getting what she wanted with nothing but a hot-head and desperate persuasion, which was nothing compared to the chest of diamonds and gold some left daily. She hoped she was getting what she wanted. The uncertainty crept back to her and began to tug at her heartstrings with deceptively soft claws.

The temple was silent for most of her wait, with nothing but the sharp-beaked ospreys for company that soared above her with piercing screeches, before changing course and heading for the nearest fishing grounds or high perches. Even the guards at every corner stayed completely quiet and still, suffering in the sweltering heat without so much as flinching.

It was only when a rumble was heard that everyone turned their attention to the skies, including Puffy. High above the pyramid, a cluster of dark grey storm clouds had suddenly appeared, looming and threatening. They were originating from the tip of the structure, small wisps darting over the shining gold at the top. Once or twice, the thunder was broken by a sharp crack of lightning. They lit up the sky with such a force that many of the priests dropped to their knees. The soldiers held up their spears, trying to hide the fear in their eyes. Even Captain Puffy leapt up from her seat and backed away, watching the spectacle with an open mouth and trembling legs.

Then, almost as abruptly as it had started, the storm stopped and the blue sky was once more devoid of all blemishes. The temple's inhabitants shared silent and questioning looks, before shakily continuing with their respective jobs. Puffy remained rooted to the spot, her eyes glued to the tip of the pyramid. Not a trace was left of the dark and stormy scene. She only looked back down when her name was called.

"Puffy?" Foolish beckoned her over from one of the many entrances. He had big, black bags underneath his eyes, and looked exhausted, ready to crumble on the spot. She had never seen him look so weak.

At first, she hesitated, still shaken by the impromptu storm and by her doubts, but eventually took a deep breath and walked over. The god led her into the pyramid, and she couldn't help but notice the warm smile that made his entire, shiny body glow like a gem.

The pyramid was hollowed out completely inside and was just as magnificent as the rest of the temple complex, perhaps even more so if she took the time to properly look around. However, only one thing mattered as soon as she lay her eyes on it.

On *him*.

In the middle of the room, shrouded in the mellow green light of a beacon, stood a proud little polished lapis altar. A dark mass was laid atop, rising and falling softly like the waves of a harbour, or a sleeping child.

A sleeping child.

Nothing mattered any more. Captain Puffy galloped across the shiny quartz floor and stopped in front of the altar. The figure stirred slightly, a little hoof finally visible as well as a mass of messy brown hair.

The captain faltered. She was almost too scared to touch the curled up figure, and couldn't do anything but stare with trembling fingers and a mouth as dry as the desert the temple was built on.

All of a sudden, Tubbo rolled over and opened one of his big, blue eyes. "Mom...?" he whispered in a strained and shaky voice.

The remains of the broken totem were brushed aside as Puffy rushed to his side, burst into tears and held him close. So close, and tighter than she ever had in her entire life. So tight, she would never let him go again.

Her initial rejoicing at Tubbo's revival had been quickly replaced as soon as she let the name sink in. *Mom*. That single, three letter word had just opened up a whole new bag of dread that she had forgotten was even within her, and she soon realized that she would be faced with questions she had hoped would never be asked.

Fortunately, they had been delayed a couple of hours by Tubbo and Michael's reunion, and Foolish's array of vague explanations to Puffy to do with the revival itself. It had worked flawlessly, and the god was clearly proud of himself, but the captain still had questions. It seemed however that many would have to stay unanswered, as Foolish was reluctant to say too much. In the end, Puffy stopped pushing. Her son was back, and that was all that mattered.

Her and Tubbo were walking through the labyrinth of splendour held within the Temple of The Undying in a blissful silence. When he finally spoke, she was shaken, and gulped.

"Mom?"

The captain looked up, and nodded. "Yes?" Her reply sounded forced, and unnatural. In fact, everything did.

He seemed just as nervous as she was. "Does that sound a little weird?" he laughed, combing his fingers through part of his fringe. "I mean... I've been calling you Captain for so long, or Puffy..."

"Well," she began. She didn't know how to tell him that her heart was ready to burst. "It feels a little strange, but—"

"But?"

"Nice." She smiled back. "It feels nice."

"That's cool. Cool, cool, cool."

A silence fell between them for a minute or two, their eyes wandering around and focusing on the paintings lining the walls. Puffy was the one to finally break it again, voicing her question before Tubbo's own inevitably burst out. "How... How long have you known?"

He seemed to know exactly what she meant. He shrugged. "Not long. Dad told me."

She froze. "Your father? When?"

"Like... not long ago. When I was dead. He talked to me and told me a lot. That's how I found out."

"Oh. I see..."

"Don't ask about his limbo," Foolish had warned her beforehand. "Many aren't pleasant, and talking about it may drag up some memories he'd much rather forget."

She tried, she really did, but now Schlatt was brought back into the picture, she couldn't ignore it. "So you met Schlatt in your afterlife?"

Tubbo shrugged again. "Yeah, I did. No big deal." The captain could tell that was a lie from the way he avoided her gaze. "He said a few things."

"Like... what?" She balled up her fist, anticipating the boiling anger that was to come. Schlatt sure was lucky that he was dead and out of her reach, or he'd have a black eye for weeks to come.

A smaller hand came to close itself around hers, and Tubbo's small figure appeared in front of her. "Easy," he laughed. "He was a lot more humble than I remember. He talked about how you met."

The captain's fist relaxed. "That's... interesting to hear."

"It was!" His excited smile fell soon after. "It sounded so perfect. Why did...?" He trailed off, and turned away. "Nevermind."

"Tubbo," Puffy said, draping a living arm around his shoulders. "What is it?"

"It's fine. I don't want you to hide anything..."

"Whatever it is you need to know, I will answer honestly," she assured him. She knelt down and grabbed his hands, conscious that she wasn't talking to a small child, but rather a teenager who was less than a year or so away from becoming an adult. She didn't care. He was her little lamb, and that's what he'd be to her, forever and ever. Her honesty too, she swore, would stay. Lies and deceit had plagued her life for so long, and had ruined so many special and loving relationships. She wouldn't let history repeat itself again.

Tubbo still seemed reluctant at first, but he soon crouched down to the captain's height and lay his head in the crook of her neck. "Why did you abandon me?" he asked in a muffled tone.

The question tore her apart. "I didn't abandon you," she said. "It was the right decision, and I kept thinking of you each day—"

"I thought you said you were going to be honest." She felt him smile against her shoulder, but she could also feel the strain of it and the wetness of his eyes.

Puffy caved in. "When your father left, I was scared," she replied. "I was scared I wasn't enough, and that I'd find a way to fail you a million different ways. You were better off without someone like me with bad luck that trailed her day and night."

"But you're my mom." Tubbo turned his face up to her, wet and sobbing. "Surely, that was enough in the end, wasn't it?"

This time, Captain Puffy couldn't find an answer, and merely hugged him in silence. Her love was enough, and she knew that now. She could come up short, she could make mistakes, but all throughout, her love for her lamb would prevail.

Love will prevail.

In the world she found herself in, that was often hard to believe.

She could never find the proper words to apologize, so she settled with two; "I'm sorry." Insignificant, puny and generic, and yet, that seemed to be more than enough for her son.

His grip on her tightened, and he buried her face further into her chest. "That's alright," he whispered. "I forgive you."

Finally, after so long, her last shred of guilt over her lamb faded into oblivion, and she breathed out in relief. Forgiveness, a blessing indeed.

"Well, now I can say that I am proudly related to the famous Captain Puffy!" Tubbo's attitude had been completely flipped on its head, and he stood up again with a wide grin.

Puffy followed suit. "And I to L'Manberg's greatest president."

He scoffed. "What did we just say about being honest?"

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"I would never be as great as Wilbur was or – heck! – even my own father!"

"Great" was probably not the best way to describe the two ex-presidents, at least from what Puffy had heard. "You were so much better than them, because you were human."

"Sheep, I think you mean!" Tubbo laughed as they started walking again.

Suppressing an eye roll, the captain tousled his hair. "You know full well what I mean," she tutted. "You were the best because you cared about things other than power and control."

"So, you prefer me to Schlatt?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I do!"

"Nice to know." He smirked, and she sighed.

Had her lamb always been this upbeat and cocky? She hadn't paid attention if he was, but now he was beside her with her best-kept secret open for him to see and happily adopt, she finally took note. Some would call his behaviour obnoxious. She called it paradise.

Her son was alive, and loved her for what she was. He held no resentment towards her, and instead seemed to rejoice in their shaky relationship held together by frayed ribbons of a time long gone. She was happier than she could ever be.

Well, almost.

There were still a few people she couldn't get over the loss of, no matter how many jokes were told. She wanted to open up to Tubbo about her dark thoughts and feelings, but something stopped her. Perhaps it was the realization that the common ground between them would make everything so much harder to talk about, so she stayed silent. She let Tubbo talk about everything and anything, just happy to hear him so relaxed around her. She soon realized that not a word was mentioned about the revival itself.

"I'm hungry. Didn't Foolish say he would bring us some snacks at some point?" Tubbo asked, looking up at the captain.

Puffy nodded vaguely. "I think he did, yes."

"Well, what are we waiting for!" Tubbo's hand grabbed Puffy's own, and she was soon being dragged across the temple's many rooms of wonderment. "Because if I don't find him in the next ten minutes, I'm stuffing my face with his precious offerings and no one can stop me!"

Yes, the revival was left untouched, as was Tubbo's death. Two important subjects that had invaded Captain Puffy's mind ever since she first decided to travel to the temple and visit the golden god that inhabited it.

They were ignored completely – and she soon realized that it was better that way.



Ranboob, I need your help. Meet me in my house. Hope you remember where that is. Make sure you're alone.

It wasn't the strangest letter Ranboo had ever received, nor the shortest. That didn't mean however that it didn't puzzle him a great deal and made him scratch his head.

When Philza's murder of crows rapped at the window and dropped off the post that morning, he didn't think much of it. He was too busy enjoying warm buttered toast with Techno and the others. Ranboo himself was exhausted, having been a late-night victim of another enderwalk phase. This one, thankfully, was watched over by Technoblade out of the goodness of his heart and protective anxiety over the hybrid. Once Ranboo had told him and the others all he knew about his condition, they were much more open to look after him and understanding of his outbursts. It made him wonder why he hadn't told them everything before.

The news the crows brought was always predictable: violent yet petty death-threats for Technoblade, a letter or two from Nikki that Phil took charge of reading out loud, and nothing for him and Sapnap. The usual, really. So when one of the black feathered birds hopped over the jam jars to deposit a muddy envelope in front of him and then patiently waited to be rewarded for its service, Ranboo was surprised. The hybrid threw a crumb that the bird wolfed down gratefully, then he began to fumble with the letter. The rest of his companions seemed just as puzzled as he was.

"A letter for Ranboo?" Sapnap asked, reclining back in his chair. "I thought everyone still hated him." The last remark earned him a quick swipe from the end of one of Phil's wings, and he spilt his coffee.

"Who's it from?" Technoblade grumbled with a mouth full of melted butter and golden crumbs. He yawned.

Ranboo read over the contents again. "I..." He was aware of everyone's stares on him, but he couldn't say anything. There was only one person who called him "Ranboob", and he didn't particularly want to be the one to reveal the existence of his bruised and battered ghost. He was tempted to throw it into the fireplace and pretend it was just some junk mail, but his attention was grabbed by the word "help" sticking out

like a sore and obvious thumb. Instead, he stood up and prepared to leave the table. "I'm going out."

He knew his reply wouldn't beg any further questions: secrecy within the Syndicate was a core and respected value. If Ranboo didn't want to elaborate on his whereabouts, they wouldn't probe. That didn't mean that they just ignored his statement.

Before he took a single step, Techno's hand shot out to catch him. "Stay safe, you hear me Ender boy?" With a smile, the hybrid nodded and reassured his mentor. Techno grinned back, and gave his arm a little squeeze. "Run along, now."

Ranboo didn't need telling twice, and quickly packed what he needed. The trip to the Greater SMP was nerve-wracking to say the least, and Ranboo made sure to pick up his pace and stay out of sight. He didn't know if things had died down or not since his pamphlet had been made public, but he didn't want to bet on it. When he finally reached Tommy's home, he breathed out a sigh of relief, and walked over to the doors. He knocked three times, casting a wary look behind him.

"Come in!"

Ranboo froze. The voice, it... But Tommy... He opened the door and stepped in, hunching over to fit through the threshold. His eyes were glued to the figure standing at the candlelit table.

Tommy turned around suddenly, and smiled brightly. "You actually came!" He ran over to the hybrid, and gave him a hearty pat on his back. "I didn't think you would!" Before Ranboo knew it, he was dragged to the table and made to flip through one of the large books on it. "There's no time to lose! See if you can find shit that could be of use!" Tommy grabbed another volume and did the same. "Chop chop!"

But Ranboo stayed paralysed, staring at the boy. The *living* boy. The living boy who could now talk, and who bore a white streak in his fair, golden hair. Ranboo had stayed silent all this time, but now he had so many questions, the first of which included thoroughly making sure he wasn't caught up in some wishful dream. The hybrid pinched his skin, his pointed fingers leaving thin marks. It hurt. He was definitely awake.

Ranboo began to splutter. "T...Tommy?" he pushed out with as much force as his constricted chest allowed him to.

"Yes?" the other replied in a bored voice. The boy barely looked up, and Ranboo's shock only amplified.

"You're... You're..." He couldn't even manage to get a full sentence out, and slammed the book shut. "HOW ARE YOU HERE?"

Tommy momentarily dragged his gaze from the book. "Oh, yeah... Should've probably started with that, right?" He sighed. "So, it involves Dream and that's all I'm prepared to say, but now we've got to kill that bastard and Sam's being a dick about it." He turned away.

He turned away.

Ranboo took a few steps back, inadvertently banging his head on the low earth ceiling. His scalp throbbed, but he didn't care. A hurt much deeper was tearing him from the inside out. "Why..." Realizing that the boy was ignoring him, he angrily raised his voice. "TOMMY! Do you have any idea how much pain we were all in?" Tears pricked the corners of his eyes, once again. Frustrated, he tugged at his hair. "How can you just waltz in here and—"

Tommy's book snapped shut. "Listen, I never asked to come back either, but the gods have let me live another life and now it's everyone's fucking problem." There was the sound of footsteps, and something kicked his shin. "Just take a moment, then chin up and help me, for fuck's sake!" The hybrid raised his gaze, only to be met by Tommy's bright blue eyes tainted with an ice-cold fury. "That's why I dragged your miserable, lanky ass over here; you're the only one I can trust."

"I... I am...?" At his words, Ranboo let his shoulders sag, and his tense shock began to fade. He was... trusted? Not only that, the *only* one trusted? He couldn't understand, and looked over Tommy again. Something was off about him, something Ranboo couldn't quite put his finger on. The boy – in his right mind – would never trust Ranboo above everyone else. *What happened? And...* His throat tightened. "What about Tubbo?" the hybrid forced himself to ask. "Does he know—"

"I don't want to talk about it." The reply was cold and sharp, and Ranboo immediately shut his mouth. Tommy stormed off to the table again, and picked up another book, flicking through it and jotting down a few notes onto a grimy and yellowing notepad.

The hybrid still didn't move, transfixed. The mention of Tubbo dragged up so many memories and regrets he had tried so hard to stay away from and forget – which should have been easy with his defective memory – and the pages of his pamphlet littering the streets came back to haunt him, a never-ending nightmare that reminded him of his

mistakes and his failures. His mistakes, including one that had brought many so much grief. His mouth was dry when he next spoke; "I'm sorry..."

Tommy looked up. "Sorry about what?"

Ranboo couldn't use a pen this time, or escape. All he had was his own voice and he had to use it, no matter how painful it was to do so. "I... I caused the security issue that made Sam lock you in with Dream..." He lowered his gaze, ashamed. Ashamed, yes, but also at peace. Finally, he told someone out loud. Not only that, it was Tommy himself, and although his fear of an outburst still draped over him, he felt slightly more serene. "I'm sorry... I know that nothing I say—"

"Ranboo, that's all in the past now!" the boy chuckled. The boy *chuckled*. Ranboo searched his eyes for resentment, or spite. He found no trace of any of them. "Don't worry about it!"

How Ranboo wished he didn't have to worry about it! Why did his memory have to hang on to things he'd much rather forget, and cast aside others that he wanted to keep safe within him? Why was he cursed? What had he done, and why did Tommy's laughter banish all those darkened thoughts about himself from his mind?

The giggling was infectious, and the hybrid had to control himself to not also burst out laughing. It wasn't the time, it wasn't the place, but it was the right person. He settled for a small grin instead, that immediately faltered as his eyes were dragged back down to the table. The books still littered the surface and in an attempt to distract himself, Ranboo read a few titles. They all seemed to cover similar, slightly concerning themes of weaponry and robberies. His smile fell. "So, you want to kill Dream?" he gulped, anxiously eyeing the heavy axe lying beside Tommy's bed in the corner.

The boy's attention had since turned back to the leather-bound volume in his arms. "Correct," he mumbled, scribbling down something else.

"And Sam won't let you."

"Dickhead..."

"I... I'm pretty sure that seals the deal, then."

"What does?"

"Sam's refusal!" Ranboo spluttered. "Tommy, he's the warden, there's no way—"

The boy brought a heavy fist down on the table, and the hybrid automatically straightened his back, as if he was answering a general's command. Which, from what he knew of L'Manberg's olden days, he was indeed. A child, but still a general, and one that still seemingly craved the respect he was once given. "Look, do you think I got to where I am by giving up?" Tommy replied harshly. "I'm going to get into that prison whether he wants me to or not!"

His determination should have impressed Ranboo, but it did nothing more than frighten him and make him dread the ending of Tommy's newly given life. Wherever it had come from, of course. "Don't threaten him, Tommy," he feebly tried to persuade him with empty words of advice. "He cares about you—"

For the fourth time in their conversation alone, Ranboo found himself getting interrupted by the blond boy yet again. "Fuck him and his lies, then. I'm getting into the prison one way or another."

That could only mean one way. "By... by force?" All of this was getting ridiculous. "Tommy, this is Pandora's Vault we're talking about—"

"Well, *you* certainly tried, didn't you?"

The hybrid bristled at the sudden implication and recall to his crime months ago now. Tommy's mouth certainly moved before his brain did, or so Ranboo tried to comfort himself. "It failed, and a life was lost in the process!" *Your life*, he added silently. "You can't exactly pick the locks of a place like that!"

"Who said I was going to do something as small as hijacking the redstone? That's a coward's way in! Aha!" Tommy's face lit up and he squinted at the particular page in front of him. A brief moment passed, and he smirked. "Now, this is exactly what I was looking for!" With a proud gesture, he lay the book on top of the rest, giving it the privilege of being centre stage. He then went off to scavenge through one of his chests. A moment later, he pulled out a tattered blue coat visibly two sizes too small for him, and forced his arms through the sleeves. "Come on, Boo! We have things to do." Without even giving Ranboo a chance to react, he strode out of the door in a noisy and theatrical exit.

Ranboo was more than prepared to drop everything and run after his friend, if only to keep him out of trouble as some sort of lanky, nervous chaperone. That said, he couldn't help but look over at what had suddenly inspired Tommy enough to push him outside the den he had clearly spent hours and hours in, combing through the dozens of books littering the workspace.

The hybrid's eyes quickly scanned the page, the words jumbling together written in a language he somehow recognized but couldn't understand. A picture, more accurately a reprinted copy of a painting, took pride of place in the middle of the book, surrounded by walls of text printed in the smallest of letters known to man or beast. The words still foreign to him, he focused on the image.

The general colour palette was of shades of brown and orange-tinted gold, and depicted what looked like a city landscape. It wasn't a "modern day" city – at least in the sense that the Old World understood it – but so much older than that. Ranboo was no good with history, and so racked his brains to try and piece together chronological clues. He only noted very few. Groups of people in long coats, ragged petticoats and pointed black tricornered hats stood in the foreground, pointing long muskets up to the sky and rolling a cannon towards an arched stone gateway. In the background, crumbling houses smouldered with black and dark grey clouds that billowed up into the sky above. To the left; a monstrous, castle-like building loomed over most of the picture, its large and rounded towers silently watching over the carnage beneath. They still were seemingly standing strong and grounded between the smoke, surrounded by barricades of debris and dusty cobbles.

Ranboo frowned and furrowed his brow, still just as puzzled as before. He peered at the caption beneath.

La Prise de la Bastille, 14 Juillet 1789

Chapter Forty-Four: The Call To Arms

"Operation Bastille" was the name that ended up being chosen. Tommy had originally wanted to call the entire campaign "Operation Slashclaw 2.0", but Ranboo spoke out against it for the simple reason that his brain wouldn't remember such an elaborate name. Especially one that had nothing to do with what was being planned.

Again, Ranboo had no idea what had dragged him into this mess if not his affection for – and quite honestly his need to be accepted by – the friend he had killed. All he was certain of is that he was sticking by Tommy's side throughout the entire planning process, like a devoted little hound.

The preparation took four days in total. The first one was his reunion with Tommy's living self which ended with a surprisingly pleasant walk filled with chatter and jokes. Whatever Tommy had been eager to do had soon been brushed aside as he appeared to much rather listen to Ranboo, who caught him up on everything that had happened since his death. Being this open to someone else was a strange feeling, but Tommy explicitly said that he trusted Ranboo above anyone else, and so the hybrid only thought it decent to return that same trust. He told him everything about his life, from the blackmail to his first death in the icy plains of the Northern tundra. Tommy laughed.

"Wow, you got yourself into some deep shit when I was gone," the boy scoffed, nudging the hybrid's thin and tall figure. There were no hard feelings, and Ranboo finally felt like he could allow himself to chuckle at some of the ridiculousness of it all. Some of it was indeed laughable, and he enjoyed the relaxation of getting some much-needed closure.

The subject of Tubbo was avoided by both of them, although Ranboo often found himself wondering whether he should cross the Nether anyway and beg for his forgiveness in the quaint little settlement of Snowchester – where everyone had undoubtedly heard of what he'd done by now. He resisted every time, until he banished the idea entirely from his mind and kept his full attention on Tommy. The boy in question didn't talk as much until the daylight hours began to fade, and he breathlessly squeezed all he wanted to say into ten minutes before Ranboo took his leave and returned to the Antarctic Commune for the night.

They promised to meet up again in the morning, and the winds of change woke Ranboo up bright and early the next day. He rejoined Tommy and this time, they actually began the serious work.

Throughout the second day, Tommy explained his plan to Ranboo in excruciating detail, showing remarkably well drawn military maps and countless notes and sketches he had clearly spent all night preparing. Every single word and step described sounded crazy and risky, and yet Tommy's constant assurance and excitement made the hybrid believe, just for a moment, that the plan wouldn't be as fruitless as he first thought. That didn't mean Ranboo was excited for the upcoming operation; in fact, he was quite the opposite.

That single painting in the history book still sat in plain sight, and the scene it depicted seemed to turn darker and darker as the plan was laid out. After Tommy told him an abbreviated version of the events that happened in France the fourteenth of July 1789 – proudly informing him that Wilbur used to tell him the same stories a long time ago – everything began to make sense. It was a colossal and dangerous venture, and it

would take an insanely lucky person to pull it off flawlessly. Tommy was far from that person in question, and so was Ranboo.

However, it was on that second day that Ranboo realized they wouldn't be attempting the siege alone. Tommy dragged Ranboo out of the house again, in a situation similar to the day before. This time, however, the boy took him straight down the Prime Path and into the crowds. It was an abrupt change from yesterday's walk in the secluded forest trails, and before Ranboo could hide himself, dozens of eyes were glued to him. Not just to him, mind you, but also to the confident young boy dragging him along. Yelps of terror followed their passing as the people stared at Tommy, someone they had all been told was dead. Ranboo's presence was soon ignored, and everyone focused on the living dead that accompanied him.

Tommy should have stopped and explained, or even acknowledged the looks and cries he was getting sent his way. He should have, but he didn't, and kept marching on to Ranboo's surprise. He only stopped and addressed the onlookers when they came to a small café in the center of the Greater SMP. Tommy leapt on a tabletop and kicked the teacups at his feet. Once they had clattered to the floor and he had caught the attention of all the people in the vicinity, he began to speak. Standing in the front row of the crowd, Ranboo listened. He caught and jotted down every word, and he was certainly glad he did.

He knew Tommy had been a respected figure back in L'Manberg's beginning, but never believed the witnesses he had talked and doubted if their tales were the truth or not. That was, until today.

From the boy's first words alone, Ranboo was taken aback. Tommy was not addressing strangers; he was talking to warriors. The hybrid darted glances around him, at some of the crowd still seated at their tables. White scars and pink burns scarred the skin hidden beneath long sleeves and wide-brimmed hats, and some handled their dainty cutlery with a swordsman's grip. How Tommy knew his demographic in advance astounded and confused Ranboo, but then again, it appears this plan had been planned out perfectly all the way.

The speech Tommy gave was loud, but not obnoxious, quick but not rushed, wordy, but far from boring, and above all, draped with charisma and a maturity the hybrid never knew he had. It was powerful, influential and persuasive, painting a glorious picture that sent murmurs of approval throughout the crowd.

Tommy himself also looked the part – dare Ranboo say, the spitting image of a leader. He basked in the blazing sun, his hair alight and circling his head like a halo. The

white streak looked more magnificent than ever, and his stance – one arm folded behind his back while the other illustrated his talking – bore a striking resemblance to the few oil paintings Ranboo had glimpsed of Wilbur Soot before Doomsday burned them all to a crisp. The undersized coat Tommy had unburied from one of his chests was richly ornate with white highlights, faded golden buttons and shimmering stitching. It took Ranboo less than a day to realize that it was part of Tommy's old L'Manberg uniform; a coat that once probably reached his knees but that now hung barely below his hips. A child's coat being worn by the same owner, years and years apart. While Tommy's height and size had changed, it seemed that his personality and morals certainly had not, or so the sea of chatter around him said.

When Tommy's final death had become public news, very few took notice, and even fewer grieved. There was always some sort of bitter aftertaste after Doomsday came and went, a lingering spite towards the boy. He had taken the blame for all the people's misfortunes, once again. Ranboo didn't expect many to rally around him now he was back to wreak more havoc. He was surprised.

The first call to arms on that quaint little café terrace was heard out from beginning to end, and once it was done, everyone erupted into a collective roar. Not a roar of anger; a roar of approval and awe. Even Ranboo couldn't help but join in, and Tommy winked at him. His friend leapt down from the table soon after and began to mingle with the people. Questions were asked, and hyperbolic answers were given. Ranboo, at first, remained on the outskirts of the group, aware that many still gave him cold, side-eyed looks that brought painful memories of his pamphlet back to him. It was only when Tommy dragged him along and began to introduce the hybrid as his right hand man that he could finally face the people again.

Some of the stares were still wary and disapproving, and would always stay that way, but other people forgave and glorified his presence. Now, he was standing at the side of a confident, eloquent general who came back from the dead. He was untouchable.

"Welcome to the revolution, Ranboo," Tommy chuckled between the adoration of the people. That was when reality hit him.

He was in this now with Tommy. He couldn't back out.

That same day, they made multiple other stops all around the Greater SMP and Tommy made the same speech. Their ranks began to grow faster than Ranboo ever thought they would, until they clearly had influenced enough people to form an entire army. It wasn't just made up from old L'Manbergians, oh no: the speech had caught the

attention of a good portion of the Greater SMP and a few of the Badlands' uninfected people, who soon pledged their own loyalty to the cause.

Everyone promised to stick together until they broke into Pandora's Vault, and killed the prisoner held there. The message had found its mark.

Their allies all picked and wore a vibrant green chestnut leaf pinned to their breasts; the colour, they said, symbolized hope. "History is repeating itself!" Tommy exclaimed with a loud whoop of joy. Ranboo didn't exactly know what he meant by that.

It was a strange day for Ranboo. On one hand, he was finally forgiven for his crimes, and dragged into breathless and excited parades through the streets as their new allies rejoiced and praised his and Tommy's names. On the other, his stomach sank as he realized just how many people were ready to slit Dream's throat and watch him bleed. The collective desire for blood was somewhat terrifying. He went to bed that night with some difficulty, his anxiety growing. Eventually, however, his drowsiness from the day's excitement took over and he slept like a log.

On the third day, they robbed the Greater SMP's armoury.

With their new army – and surprisingly, some of the armoury's guards themselves – behind them, they marched on the building and took whatever they could. Queues were made to pass along muskets, bayonets and pistols. Kegs of gunpowder were rolled out from the basement storage, and finally, five canons were recovered to everyone's delight. Tommy and Ranboo's ragtag mess of battalions worked quickly and were in and out in less than a minute, all before the King could be told what was happening and send over a garrison to fight them off.

After that, half of the army was left to guard the weapons and check they were all in perfect shape, while the others were sent to start gathering other materials: food, wood, and anything else that could be used to make a sturdy camp that could last for a while. Ranboo, Tommy and a few other warriors the hybrid had never met – but that the golden-haired boy clearly trusted enough – huddled around the table in Tommy's home and began to map out a plan of attack.

The fourth day, they finally approached the Vault, and claimed the Badlands' beach front along it. They began to set up their tents and the other temporary installations they needed. That was when Ranboo seriously started having second thoughts.

"I can't do this." The realization slipped out in a breathless whisper, and hit Ranboo like a ton of bricks. The old uniform grew tight around his chest. According to Tommy, it

had belonged to Wilbur so many years ago, and was the only one that would somehow fit Ranboo's height. He quickly unbuttoned it, gasping. The salty air burned his lungs.

Tommy drew his eye away from the spyglass he pointed up at the Vault, and turned to the hybrid. "What was that?"

Quickly composing himself, the hybrid shook his head. "I'm... fine, I guess..."

"You guess?"

"I..." He trailed his gaze up to the imposing walls of Pandora's Vault. A shadow dashed in front of one of the many barred windows, momentarily lingering before moving on. The hybrid cracked. "Tommy, are you sure about this?"

His friend eyed him suspiciously. "Why are you asking?"

Ranboo fiddled with his long fingers. "I've read a bit more about the Bastille..." he confessed, drawing out his memory book and flipping through until he reached the pages he had scribbled his notes on. "...and it didn't end well."

"Yeah, I know. The governor's head ended up on a pike."

The hybrid froze at Tommy's nonchalance, and became even more frantic. "That's exactly what I mean," he cried. "It didn't end well! Are you telling me we're going to have to kill Sam?" Ranboo couldn't betray Sam, not again. He hadn't even been forgiven the first time.

His question was met with silence, and Ranboo waited anxiously for an answer. Tommy's shoulders sagged for a moment, but only for a moment. He soon straightened himself, and spoke. "If the Warden gets in the way, that's his own problem, and he'll suffer the consequences."

The slight hesitation and reluctance in his tone didn't escape Ranboo, and he was somewhat relieved that the boy still held an ounce of empathy and sense in this entire mad military campaign. But if the hybrid knew one thing about Tommy, it was that his stubbornness often held more weight than his reason. "Don't rush into anything," he tried to advise his friend. "We can't afford to shed any more blood."

"I will if I have to."

With that final statement, Tommy turned back to the Vault with his arms clasped behind his back, and Ranboo regretfully realized he was too far gone. The glorious,

confident leader he had recently painted him as was replaced by the statue of a madman. A pure, utter madman who didn't know when to stop and when his ideas were beyond insane. The hybrid couldn't breathe anymore. Treading lightly, he rushed away.

He desperately tried to figure his way out of the maze of tents, weapons and warriors, running around madly like a bull in a china shop. A tall, lanky bull in a world of canvas and the sickening stench of gunpowder that suffocated him at every turn. He had to get out of here, and he had to find someone with half a brain to talk to about all this, and put a stop to it. But all the recruits around him were just as insane as Tommy was, it seemed. They stopped him whenever they could, drunk on the promise of victory and adrenaline.

"Can you believe it? Finally, another war!" one cried happily.

"Tommy's return was the sign we've all been waiting for," another piped up later on.

"Kill the smiling nightmare!"

"And slit the Warden's throat if he tries to stop us!"

Ranboo pushed each warrior away, sickened by their enthusiasm and their clear bloodlust. What had he been doing the past few days? Why hadn't he taken note of the red flags and the warnings? He wanted no part in a battle fought for nothing, nothing at all. It was useless, and a waste of so many poor lives.

When he finally reached the edge of the camp, he began to untie one of the horses attached to a post. Why had they decided to form a cavalry? The Vault was in the middle of the ocean! Either way, they certainly wouldn't miss one.

"Hey!"

Just as Ranboo was leading the bay coloured mare away, a little voice froze him to the spot. Looking down, he watched as a little girl ran up to him, discarding her cleaning bucket and struggling to balance with the heavy musket slung over her back. With short ginger hair, light freckles and a button nose, she looked around nine years old, perhaps even younger, and the hybrid's want to stop everything grew even stronger. Tommy had no right to drag other children into this mess: his past wasn't an excuse to justify it.

"I'm just borrowing her for a while," he pressed to explain, hooking one foot into a stirrup and slinging his tall body into the saddle.

The little girl fumbled for her weapon, in vain. It kept swinging around her back, just out of reach, causing her to spin in a small and strangely endearing cat and mouse chase until she closed her hand around the barrel. Panting, she glared up at Ranboo. "I'm fine," she huffed, as if he had made an offer to help, which he hadn't. "You're not allowed to take--"

"I know, I know, but this is important!" Ranboo impatiently began to crane his neck over and around the tents, desperately trying to see if anyone else had noticed his escapade.

"Wait, you're that enderman creature everyone talks about!"

The hybrid looked back down at the girl, biting his tongue. "Uh, yeah, maybe..."

"My daddy says you're a traitor."

He tensed up, but tried to brush it off. "Does he now..." he grumbled.

"What's a traitor?"

That was a question he didn't expect, and he crossed the little girl's gaze again. Her hostility had disappeared, and her bright eyes were lit up by wonderment and curiosity. That hurt the hybrid even more; a child who didn't understand the concepts and terms of warfare was being unfairly dragged into a fight she knew nothing about. Through his boiling frustration, he tried to formulate an answer that could satisfy her. He was somewhat a professional at coming up with those kinds of replies, as taking care of Michael showed, but today he was at a loss. "A traitor? Um... a traitor is..." He trailed off. "It's... It's hard to explain..."

"Is it someone good?"

Ranboo faltered. "I... I guess it depends on who you ask." A flash of inspiration crossed his mind. "A traitor is someone who does something they think is right, but no one else thinks so." That was a vague yet believable explanation, right? He turned to leave.

"Like the Warden?"

He turned back, once more taken aback by the little girl's comments. "Huh?"

"Well... He keeps the bad guy locked up, so he must be good, but General Tommy doesn't agree."

"Is... Is that what you think?"

She shrugged. "That's what I understand."

Oh, how Ranboo wished he could have the same, blind innocence to the whole thing! The truth behind the campaign ran so much deeper than the child in front of him could ever comprehend. "Sure, if that's how you want to see it..."

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere."

"Are you running away?"

Ranboo reassured her with a smile. "No. No, I'm not. If Tommy asks where I am, tell him I've gone to get reinforcements."

The little girl's curiosity turned into pride, puffing up her chest now she was entrusted with such an important mission. She nodded eagerly, and Ranboo sighed, relieved.

Without another word, he spurred his horse into a run, and thundered away from the camp. The blistering air of the Badlands lashed at him as he rode, messing up his hair and threatening to rip his memory book out of his pocket, but he made sure to keep the mare's pace as it was.

He had lied, at first; he was indeed planning to run. He wanted to rush all the way back to the Antarctic Commune and stay there, never to emerge from exile again.

It was only when he was talking to that little, red-haired girl and talked her out of shooting a round of messy bullets into his head that another idea had popped into his mind. Every battle needed some sort of mediator to at least attempt peace, and Ranboo had soon noticed that Tommy hadn't even talked about getting one. Ranboo was certainly not the best choice for the job, and neither were any of the other soldiers.

Fortunately, he knew someone perfect for the role, someone who Tommy seemingly respected and listened to, yet also had a strong relationship with the Warden of Pandora's Vault. That's what he kept telling himself, and pushed down his real idea of finding someone mature who knew how to deal with a child's temper tantrums.

Perhaps the ones she had encountered before did not involve copious amounts of gunpowder or influences from the French Revolution, but then again, who was to say?

Determined, Ranboo gripped the reins tighter. The horse tore through the moorland, effortlessly leaping over the heather and landing heavily on the dusty ground. Every impact sent jittery waves coursing through the hybrid's stomach, but he tried to ignore them.

As always, he had heard the talk within the army, and couldn't help but eavesdrop despite himself. Rumours around the SMP said that Captain Puffy had travelled to the Temple of The Undying for a mysterious and unknown reason, and hadn't been seen since.

That's where Ranboo decided to look for her first.



Almost overnight, long wooden piers had stretched out from the coastline toward Pandora's Vault, standing surprisingly strong against the roaring ocean waves. At first, Sam didn't think much of them, assuming it was simply a fishing venture or the start of a harbour one of his co-leaders authorized without his knowledge. He wasn't too worried. At least, he wasn't until tents started popping up in a cluster on the mainland, and roughly thrown together barricades were raised at the edge of the docks.

Again, he tried to ignore it, at least for a while. The workers hired to work on the piers needed somewhere on site to stay, nothing new or weird there. But then, taking a closer look from a perch up in one of the prison's watchtowers, he saw pistols, muskets and armour being passed around, and a handful of heavy cannons were wheeled across the wooden pathways stretching over the ocean. They were being pointed right at the Vault.

Sam called his guards on site as soon as everything clicked. To his surprise, they listened and came as fast as they could, with no mention of the Egg.

Now here they were, standing in one of the Vault's long hallways, this one airier with glass and iron windows that let in the outside light: the three rulers of the Badlands together once again, facing a potential crisis. For once – despite their agreement of equal leadership – Sam felt like the two others were under his command, and patiently awaiting his orders. He didn't have any to give yet, and stayed silent. He was staring out toward the mainland with his back to them, pensive. He had stayed that way for the past ten minutes, occasionally listening to the shuffling of the two others behind him.

"I did a general perimeter check," Bad spoke up after a while. "They only seem to be attacking the south eastern side."

"Specifically around the tower, and they've also encircled the mainland entrance. It seems that all they have as weapons are cannons and other firearms," Ant added. His cat-eye vision was never wrong, and the warden believed him.

"How many cannons?" Sam inquired with a slight tilt of his head.

"I counted five," the cat replied. "But they're setting up a blacksmith, so they could be making more."

Sam stared out of the window. Another pier was slowly being built and fortified, and more tents were pulled up. The cannons in question that Ant had mentioned were being repositioned under the watchful eye of someone Sam knew all too well. At least, he used to. His chest tightened. "Where did they get them?" he asked in a strained voice, quickly coughing to cover up the tremble.

There was a pause followed by footsteps as Bad made his way to the window, and piped up. "I recognize their design. They're from L'Manberg."

"L'Manberg? I thought everything they owned was blown up."

"They must have recovered some of them, somehow."

"I think Eret salvaged the remaining weaponry," Ant mewled. Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw him take a stand next to Bad. "That would explain the firearms too."

The implication took only a moment to sink in. "Are you saying they stole from the Greater SMP?" the warden asked, his worry growing.

"I'm assuming that's what happened, yes."

"These muffins stole from one nation, and are now preparing to take on another. I think we could be looking at an all-out war—"

Sam held up his hand to silence the demon. "Not if we can help it."

Despite everything, another war was the last thing he needed to be dragged into. Not because he was too weak to fight, far from it. He felt that once he was thrown into a rampage, very few would come out alive. He had never known what bloodlust felt like until he brought that sword down on Ponk's arm. Loss and the fury that came with it was a strange thing, even more so when the people he loved and lost were just out of reach, tantalizingly close once again. So close yet so, unimaginably far away. The inability to get a hold of them again infuriated him.

"They don't look like they're playing around, and if they're besieging the prison then they must be confident enough in their strength." Bad's voice pulled him once again back to the situation at hand, and his rage faltered, at least for a while.

Sam focused again, and sighed. "Or they are grossly underestimating their abilities." To illustrate his example, almost on cue, a couple of the tents caught fire and were quickly ripped out of the ground and tossed into the sea. They sank beneath the waves, smoke still rising.

"Or they're led by an ambitious leader who fed them the persuasion and the courage to attempt it," Ant said.

Sam's eyes immediately scanned the makeshift camp, before spying the golden-haired boy in the dark blue and white coat who stormed over to the fire's culprits and began yelling at them, stance rigid and fists clenched by his sides. A leader. A boy. A child Sam couldn't bear to see responsible for another military campaign, knowing full well how the first ones went and the damage that ensued.

"Sam?"

He snapped back to reality. "What?"

"I said; what do we do?"

The warden hesitated, turning his attention back to the mainland. Although preparations were already being made, he could tell for a fact that they were nowhere near ready to start the offensive. Or maybe they were, and he was only trying to delay the inevitable. Either way, he had an answer to Ant's question. "Let's wait and see."

"Sam, you've got to fire first."

Sam bristled at Bad's words, and immediately shook his head. "That's the worst idea you could come up with," he criticised, and with good reason. "We wait."

"Sam, you're kidding me, right?" The demon's voice raised, and the warden bit the inside of his cheek to avoid himself from lashing out and throwing his trident somewhere and into someone he'd regret. "The sooner they're crushed, the better. If there are any more rising up, then it'll act as a warning that we're not muffining around and *will* fight back." A hand landed on his armoured shoulder, clawed and strong. "The prison can't look weak! We're acting like sitting ducks ready to get plucked!"

The metallic tang of blood in his mouth made Sam recoil, and he stopped biting. Instead, he let out a long and heavy sigh through his nose, still refusing to look at his guards. His gas-mask whistled. He needed people he could trust, and catching a single glimpse of their red eyes would shatter that illusion he took a good hour or so to build.

"Maybe the Egg—"

The warden harshly cut Antfrost off mid-sentence. "This is our battle to fight, not the Egg's." The voices in his ears screamed in what he quickly guessed was protestation, but he didn't act on them.

He knew his co-leaders would, however. "But—"

"Have they attempted to negotiate?" Sam rushed to change the subject as quickly as he could.

"No, at least—"

He cut them off again. "Then we'll start there." He left his position at the window, finally dragging his gaze away from Tommy's silhouette and making a move to leave. "I'll talk to them and get a better picture of what's happening."

He felt Bad grab him as he passed. "Wouldn't it be safer for me or Ant to go?"

He shook his head, his determination swelling up his chest and hardening his vacant stare. "As you said, Bad: the prison can't look weak." He shrugged him off. "And neither can its warden."



"You're all stupid, fucking idiots!" an exasperated Tommy yelled as his recruits scrambled to pull up another couple of tents after the last ones were burned by a fallen torch. The remains of the canvas structures had been tossed into the sea, meeting a watery grave just as many sailors once had.

A few of the soldiers tried to protest and pin the blame on one another, but their leader quickly silenced them with a menacing wave of his pistol. He turned away soon after, fuming, and strode back across the camp. His eyes darted up to the looming Vault, making sure no one was peering out through the windows. A display of some sort of weakness or incompetence was the last thing he wanted the Warden to see. Frustrated, he kicked a pebble out of his way, then held his head up to the sun.

As much as every slip-up ended with the general yelling until his voice was raw, he had to admit that he had forgotten how hard-working and skilled L'Manberg's old troops were, even more so now they had been joined by a few citizens of the Greater SMP and the Badlands. The endless supply of timber and the art of potion-fighting might prove valuable in the siege they were attempting.

Tommy was once again leading his people to a victory, and was back in a position of power and respect that he craved on the daily. But even with Ranboo at his side, he still felt the impending feeling of loneliness. There was no Wilbur, and no Tubbo any more. The emptiness was crushing, although he wouldn't let anyone know that.

He began to search for his right-hand man. It couldn't be that hard to find a tall, jumpy enderman hybrid, but Tommy wasn't having much luck. He kept looking between the maze of tents and troops, expecting to at least glimpse his tail. When that failed, he began to question his soldiers. While he expected an answer to go off, all he received were shrugs and shakes of heads.

He didn't want to resort to what he did next, but he had no other choice. His poor, abused throat... Cupping his hands, he cast one last glance around him and yelled. "RANBOO! WHERE ARE YOU, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" The swearing was unnecessary and Tommy knew that as soon as the words slipped from his mouth, but he was too angry to care. Still, he got no reply from the hybrid, and his anger began to fade into concern.

"He's gone."

Tommy turned around at the little voice, and had to look down to finally find the owner of it. A little girl with ginger hair stared up in awe at his tall figure, before immediately diverting her gaze and giving him a clumsy little curtsy.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "I'm not royalty, kid." He gestured for her to stand up, which she did. "Did you see Ranboo?"

"I think so. He's the weird black and white man, right?"

Slightly amused by the description, Tommy smiled. "Yeah, basically," he confirmed.

"I saw him taking a horse, and he told me that he was getting *reinforcements*." She stumbled on the last word, but quickly regained her composure and grinned proudly when she pronounced it correctly. "He wanted me to tell you."

So, Ranboo had left without telling Tommy. The general didn't know why that frustrated him; Ranboo wasn't a slave, and was free to go if he pleased. Most likely, it was the fact that he hadn't faced Tommy himself and instead sent a little girl to relay the message. *Reinforcements, my ass...* Anyone that had wanted to help them had come to help. There was no way that the nervous hybrid could get anyone else. He was using that as an excuse to be a coward and run from battle. Loyalty was no longer on the table.

Tommy looked down at the messenger. "Thanks for telling me."

The little girl smiled and gave him a salute. In that split second, Tommy saw a reflection he never thought he'd glimpse again.

Tommy didn't particularly like kids that were younger than him, but there was something about this girl that reminded him of himself. Perhaps it was the grimy complexion and messy hair, or maybe even the mischievous glint in her eyes and the oversized weapon she carried on her back. Whatever made him soften, it did so quickly.

"How old are you?" he asked her softly.

She stood up straight. "I'm seven," she said, beaming. "I'll be eight next week!"

The general felt his stomach churn. If only he could guarantee that she would live to see her birthday... Suddenly, the reflection became too real, too familiar to him. A young child thrust into the horrors of war was something that occurred way too often nowadays, and Tommy knew exactly how that could fuck up a kid. He hated to admit it, but even he himself still woke up to night terrors and noises of guns and screams ringing in his head years after the bloodshed. No child should have to go through that. "Where are your parents?"

"My daddy said he's in charge of the guns, and my mommy's at home."

"Then why are you here?"

She shrugged. "Daddy said you need all the help you could get."

For the first time that day, Tommy felt something relative to remorse pool in his stomach. "Go home," he ordered, a little too sharply.

He realized his mistake as soon as the child in front of him began to tremble, her wide eyes brimming with fearful tears. "Did... Did I do something wrong...?" she gulped, her lip quivering.

Tommy wasn't good with any of this comforting stuff, and panicked. He went to touch her, then withdrew, then looked around for help, then looked back and decided to crouch down to her height. He smiled. "No, you didn't do anything," he said. "But you have a home and a family, make the most of it. The battlefield is no place for a child."

"B... But my daddy said you were a kid when you led L'Manberg..."

"That doesn't mean that it was a good thing, for me or the nation. Just... go home. You want no part of this fight, trust me."

Tommy wasn't the most honest person to have ever lived, and legends weren't known to convey correct facts either. Even so, the little girl seemed to believe him with no questions asked, and nodded. Before long, the musket was abandoned at the general's feet, and she was nowhere to be found. Tommy picked up the weapon and turned it over in his hand. From the weight and sound alone, he could tell it was loaded, and he cautiously lay it against the nearest gun rack.

He thought that would be the last distraction, and he could finally put his feet up after four long days of endless planning and commanding, at least for an hour or two in the coolness of his own tent – shielded from the light of the sun and with a nice glass of water to accompany the lot. However, warfare allowed no rest for its wagers.

"THE ENTRANCE! THE GATE IS OPENING!"

The yell from one of the recruits snapped Tommy back to the reality of the military campaign, and he rushed towards the sound with the rest of the army. When he reached Pandora's Vault's entrance on the mainland, he elbowed his way through the crowd to get to the front. Everyone around him seemed shocked and fearful, and the general didn't know why until he almost crashed into the figure emerging from the locked iron gates.

He stumbled backwards, and straightened himself immediately. His blue eyes were nothing but thin, angry slits in his face as he watched the golden figure approach him. "Sam."

"Tommy." The warden stopped in front of him.

Too close for comfort. The general took a deliberate and visible step back. He continued staring at the newcomer, hatred boiling in his veins. At least, he wished it was hatred; it was definitely something else, something that would make the campaign just that little bit harder to go through with. The silence was deafening. Even the soldiers seemed to be holding their breaths.

Sam cracked first, to the delight of Tommy's ego. "How are you—"

"Cut the bullshit, Sam," he snapped, cutting him off. "What do you want?"

"I want to stop you from making a terrible mistake," Sam replied. His voice was low, but soft. Just as soft as his touches, and the words of comfort and praise that Tommy used to witness on the daily, gushing out like a sparkling and enchanting waterfall.

How things had changed. "And how will you do that?" He was aware of the eyes of the entire army burning through him, but he couldn't keep himself from bringing in the personal arguments. "Sugar-coat your words? Say you care about me then lie to my fucking face?" His heart began to ache, and he realized that just as he had lost Tubbo and Wilbur, he had lost Sam too.

The warden's next words did nothing to help his hurt. "Everything I ever said to you is true, Tommy. I would never lie to you. I care for you."

"Then go back in there and slay that stupid fucking shithead, then bring me his head on a silver platter," Tommy demanded, his crossed arms tightening. His hands gripped the sleeves of his old coat. He knew the answer that was to come.

"You know full well I can't do that," Sam replied.

"Why not?"

"You know why. He saved you once, and we need him alive to save you again." Abruptly, Sam's attention that had previously been focused exclusively on Tommy had turned to the people around them both. "To save you all!"

Before he knew it, Tommy had stepped in front of the warden, deliberately blocking his view of the army. He could hear the doubtful whispers behind him as some seemed to be genuinely considering Sam's words. Empty, meaningless words from someone who had no idea how painful revival really was. He was only playing with the souls, picking and choosing who he wanted to have brought back. Tommy was Sam's first victim. "Don't address my people," the general sneered.

"They're not your people, Tommy, not any more." Sam's kind, black and green eyes caught his gaze. He couldn't look away. "They're a bloodthirsty horde you dragged into what they love most; an excuse to wreak havoc."

Despite himself, Tommy drank up his words. Despite himself, he looked at the soldiers around him. Despite himself, he saw that Sam was telling the truth. These warriors hadn't joined him to right the wrongs Dream had done to him; they only wanted the chance to rip his heart out and then brag to anyone who would listen that they dined on the blood and the body of Chaos himself. The craze in their eyes was unmistakable now he knew how to place it. It wasn't unwavering loyalty: it was bloodlust.

Again, Tommy felt the sharp stab of betrayal, although this time, the blow was blunter. The general didn't have their loyalty, but their mutual cause did. In the end, killing Dream was all he wanted to achieve. His brief defeat rose up into confidence, and he faced Sam with just as much hostility as before. "As if you'd know, bitch."

"Tommy—"

The general snatched the pistol from his belt and cocked it. The silver from the decorations on the barrel reflected in the sun, and he purposely directed the glares towards the warden's eyes in an attempt to blind him. Not as a tactical advantage, but simply out of spite. "Let me in, Sam. Let me kill him myself!"

A soft but firm hand pushed the gun down. "This doesn't have to end this way. You can just pack up and leave, and nothing has to happen. No one will think any differently of you if you decide to call this whole thing off."

"And why would I?"

"Because I might be forced to make an example of you." In a sudden and brutal gesture that Tommy didn't expect, the prongs of Sam's trident were pressed against his throat. For the first time in what felt like forever, Tommy froze in terror. Gulping, he crossed the warden's gaze. To his surprise, he saw no hardness or anger, contrasting heavily with his actions. "Please don't make me hurt you, Tommy..." His voice was barely above a whisper, and Tommy realized that it was meant only for him. He even took the time to notice that Sam had removed his gas-mask throughout the whole confrontation, allowing the general to truly see him. For a moment, he even thought that Sam did truly care for him, and that he was just as scared to hurt Tommy as Tommy was to be impaled.

That all melted when a multitude of clicks were heard, and the general risked a look around. All the soldiers had collectively grabbed their weapons and stood in firing positions, forming a circle around the two of them. All their barrels were pointed at the warden.

The trident's sharp points left Tommy's neck, and the general watched as Sam stepped back. Quickly composing himself, Tommy smirked. "Well, it seems like I'm not the one in danger here," he laughed, readjusting his overcoat. Sam was wrong; his army *was* loyal to him. "I'd scuttle back to your shit-hole of a prison before things get serious."

Tommy's threats had never been taken seriously, until now. The fear that flashed across Sam's eyes was glorious to see, and a rare sight Tommy would hang on to. He was scaring someone. Him and his ragtag army were *actually* scaring someone, and not only that, but a powerful leader and man whose influence stretched far beyond the drawn up borders. The warden looked around him, then back at Tommy. The general expected him to say something more – to beg, perhaps. But Sam stayed silent. Wordlessly, he strapped his trident onto his back, and rushed back towards the gates.

That seemed to be a signal, and the silence was broken. The closest soldiers rushed to the entrance, attempting to claw their way between the bars and screaming obscenities. Sam was quicker and stronger, and locked the gates shut before running back to the lit Nether portal. The rest of the army let out bellows of victory and cries of delight. Only Tommy didn't move, his eyes glued to the warden right up until the portal closed. He couldn't rejoice.

They hadn't clutched a proper victory. *Yet*.

Tommy turned to the nearest lieutenant. "How many cannons do we have?"

"Seven are ready," the lieutenant replied without hesitation. "And two more are being assembled as we speak—"

The general silenced him with a wave. "Give the order to start loading them." His eyes dragged themselves once more up to the obsidian and blackstone walls of Pandora's Vault. "Then, wait for my command."

Chapter Forty-Five: The Storming Of Pandora's Vault

Tommy had lost his last life at the beginning of March, locked up in a prison cell by a man he thought loved him above all else. Now, many, many months later, Tommy was back on his feet, alive and angrier than ever before.

That day of July 14th had been upon them for many, many hours now – perfectly and intentionally aligned with the decided plan. The sun was beating down on the heads of all who ventured outside of their homes. Soldiers were sweating and suffering, crouched at the foot of the barricades with their loaded firearms, silently awaiting their command. After a while, the quiet was broken by the muffled humming of revolutionary anthems from a time long gone, the lyrics muttered through the gritted teeth of the determined warriors that lined the piers.

Tommy stood upon one of the mountains of stone and debris, eyes narrowed against the shimmering glare. His heart pounded in his ears like the drums of war he grew up with. He was the only, truly visible figure of the army, and he would have had it no other way. The scene stayed perfect and unmoving, the melodious droning being the only change to break the silence.

Suddenly, Tommy held up his fist. A hush fell over the entire army. Everyone froze. Even Sam, watching nervously from a window, felt his breath hitch. Then, the golden rose lowered his arm with a sharp, brutal gesture. The fuses were lit, and after days of preparation, the first shot was taken against Pandora's Vault.

The cannonball sailed over the stretch of ocean the piers hadn't already covered, and slammed into the corner of the tower. The next two hit the wall next to it, followed by the other remaining four in a similar pattern. The impacts were sharp and looked impressive from afar – drawing up clouds of dust and shards of dark black rock – but in reality, the floor barely shook beneath the warden's feet. It was still enough to snap him to attention, and he reacted immediately.

Pandora's Vault was under attack.

He ran to find his guards – still thankfully posted exactly where he had stationed them earlier that same day, after his negotiation with Tommy went awry and the fear began to ebb at him. Bad and Ant were just as concerned as him, from their puzzled expressions and short breaths.

"What's happening?" Antfrost yowled, his red eyes wide with terror as his claws scraped the walls.

Sam didn't have time to explain. It was very obvious, and he didn't need to justify anything. He pulled the cat behind him, next to Bad, and began to drag them throughout the prison. They reached the large Vault door, beyond which lay the rudimentary cells and, even further than that, the holding cell. A stone staircase spiralled up to the ceiling above, climbing into darkness.

The warden pulled his two guards in front of him, and began to unhook a couple of the keys from the ring around his belt. "Ant," he ordered, cursing his clammy, trembling hands. After almost dropping the key twice, he held it out to the cat. "Go right up to the top of the stairs, and take the first doorway you see to your left. Follow the hallway until you reach a lever. Insert the key, and activate it. The dispensers will do the rest."

Antfrost hesitated briefly, before sharing a red-eyed look with Bad and rushing off. The clanking of his armour resonated around the room as he ascended, and Sam waited until they began to fade before talking to Bad. He handed him another key. "Follow Ant up the stairs, but stop when you reach the halfway point. Unlock the passage you'll find there, and make sure the firearms are positioned correctly. Pressing the button, and make sure to stand back."

The demon nodded and grabbed the key, then smiled at the warden. "You've built one heck of a fortress here, Sam," he chuckled, rushing off. "One muffin of a mechanical monster..."

The warden had never thought that the monstrous machines he implemented into the already scary structure would ever have to be used, but here they were. When Bad and Ant had disappeared, he began to pace the obsidian floor. His golden armour clanked, suddenly heavier than before and much more of a hindrance than a comfort. He took off his chest plate and his dark green cape, tossing them to the side. He kept his arm and leg guards, now allowing himself to breathe more freely in the leather cuirass he always made sure to wear underneath. He tossed his gas-mask and his gloves aside as well. His bandaged arm was tainted pink by the leaking sores.

Tommy's army was never going to set a single foot inside the prison, that he was certain of. Somewhat certain. Somewhat sure. Maybe they wouldn't. He hoped dearly that they wouldn't.

The rumbles of the fired cannons and the screamed commands of Tommy's captains and lieutenants filled his ears. He tried to block them out. He wished everything would stop. He wanted the nightmare to cease.

He didn't want to make "an example" out of Tommy, or any of the people that followed him. He wasn't like that. The man that had threatened Puffy and Tommy, had chased off Ranboo when he had begged for mercy at his feet and the man that had chopped Ponk's arm off was *not* him. The warrior who craved revenge and blood wasn't who he really was.

The Warden of Pandora's Vault wasn't his true self.

The prison had taken full control of him, and he could see that now. His relationships, his sleep and every ounce of his time and redstone skill were locked in the obsidian box just as Dream himself was. His creation had turned him into a maniac, and a pushed down hatred for his most impressive creation began to rise.

In a flash of reprieve, he had the sudden urge to open up the Vault to let the army in, and march with them to rip out Dream's throat. He would have, if he hadn't found the heart he had cast aside when he saw fit.

His duty, despite everything, still called. Not as a warden, but as an old friend, and a decent being in a land of so many traitors and villains. A loud creak echoed above him, followed by a sizzling and popping as gallons upon gallons of piping hot, liquid fire were poured out of their containers. Ant had done his job, and it was only a matter of time before Bad set the other line of defence into motion as well.

Now, only Sam was left. He wasted no time in rushing off, heading deep into the Vault in order to defend its most priceless addition.

The prisoner.

"READY!"

"WAIT FOR IT, WAIT FOR IT!"

"AIM!"

"WAIT FOR IT!"

"FIRE!"

The cannons fired their fourth round of shots, hitting the exact same spots. The air rumbled like a storm, the clear blue sky slowly being filled by the stifling smoke and remains of gunpowder. Tommy had since leapt off his perch, and was busy marching between his troops, barking orders at the top of his lungs and spluttering through the

smog. Every boom of the weaponry momentarily deafened him, and the impacts rang in his ears like carillon bells.

But none of that stopped him, oh no. Being a general with an iron will and the sheer determination of his predecessors, he would only give up when his final breath left his body.

The army moved quickly, rolling the heavy cannonballs down the piers and towards the firing range without so much as a tired grunt, and with a speed Tommy couldn't fathom. A dangerous, sharp pride began to grow within him, and his yells grew even louder.

Between the firing and the screaming, he ordered a good portion of his men to sail across the remaining channel of water in small, frail wooden boats. Armed with pickaxes, they ducked under the whizzing artillery and scrambled onto the black pebbled beach of the Vault. They raised their tools and began to hack at the walls, barely fazed by their dangerous proximity to the cannons' shots.

From the mainland, Tommy watched them eagerly, his grip on his pistol growing ever tighter and ever excited. He couldn't wait to shoot a silver bullet through the green bastard's skull. Which "green bastard" was the question, and in all honesty, both Sam and Dream would have been the general's first answer.

Abruptly, a cry echoed out across the ocean. "LAVA!"

The general snapped his head up. Before his very eyes, a blanket of orange began to course down the prison's walls, encasing every nook and cranny with a burning, bubbling liquid. That single, growing danger sent a wave of panic throughout the troops, and the designated miners raced back to their boats.

"FALL BACK, FALL BACK!"

The lava continued to snake down the building, before creeping along the beachfront and spitting fiery rocks at the heels of the soldiers. They were fast, but so was the bubbling threat.

Tommy looked away when the first screams reached his ears, followed by the stench of burning flesh as a portion of his soldiers were swallowed up. Those who only had one life left got the mercy of a final death, while the others were made to suffer their pyre two to three times over. The lucky ones who had managed to escape rowed

as fast as they could, crying out to their perishing comrades. They held out their arms, offering useless help the dying never even got to see.

When the screaming stopped and turned to desperate and heartbroken wailing from the survivors, Tommy stared back at the carnage. The lava continued to pour out from the Vault, layering upon itself as the ocean waves contained it on the island. It draped the prison in a glowing cloak that glimmered like the evening sun, and the heat waves from it were stifling. The cannons continued firing, their ammunition disappearing into the burning curtain and never seen again. The general let out a long string of well-chosen curses, his knuckles turning white. Between the foul odour of cooked corpses and ash, Tommy was questioned by his men. Should they keep firing, or pack up and call the whole campaign a bust?

"Keep shooting," the general ordered through gritted teeth, snatching up a lighter and setting off the closest cannon himself. The sudden and unprepared shot startled everyone and the firearm thrust backwards, knocking a number of the soldiers into the sea below the walkways.

Faced with fearful cries and spluttered questions, Tommy growled and brushed himself off, his coat and face black with grime and gunpowder residue. The only parts of him that remained untouched were his furious, blue eyes and the perfect white streak in his hair. "DID I TELL YOU TO STOP?" he screamed to his troops, watching as they frantically began reloading the cannon again. "KEEP FIRING!"

Immediately afterwards, another round of cannons were shot, but they didn't belong to the ones perched on the edges of the piers. "They're coming from the Vault!" someone yelled, right before the furthest pier was hit and started to crumble into the waves.

Sure enough, the wall of lava defending the prison began to spit out something more devastating and much more precise than simple specks of fire, with loud booms that rivalled even their own cannons. The cannonballs crashed into the waves, into the lava and occasionally, into the military camp itself.

If the siege was chaotic beforehand, then what the new round of fire had initiated was a hellish mess unlike anything Tommy had ever witnessed before. He reacted straight away, his years of experience finally coming back into use. "CHANGE THE AIM!" he commanded between the increasing screaming. "TAKE DOWN THE WARDEN'S CANNONS, OR WE'RE ALL DEAD!"

The last line was meant to come out as an empty but vivid threat, yet the general began to realize with horror that it was the most plausible outcome for his army, and himself.

As his soldiers began to manoeuvre the heavy weapons up to the sky, Tommy yelled again, this time to anyone who would listen. "AND SOMEONE FIND ME RANBOO AND HIS SO-CALLED FUCKING REINFORCEMENTS!"



Ranboo wasn't sure if his escapade would amount to anything at first but as he rode along the beaten, sandstone track, he finally confirmed one of his many suspicions about himself.

He had very, very selective memory. Blowing up the realm's most prized building? Nope, no recollection whatsoever. Finding the way to the Temple of The Undying through two different dimensions after only one visit he made so long ago? Suddenly, he knew the roads like the back of his hand.

The temple rose over the sand dunes, and he spurred his steed on. Everything whipped by and he completely ignored the startled cries and sharp shouts of the structures guards who ordered that he stop or at the very least slow down. The mare he rode was sturdy and managed to gallop all the way, only stopping when Ranboo judged a path too risky and turned her around to find another one. Her endurance was unmatched, except perhaps by Carl. That said, like Techno's horse, that didn't mean she liked being pushed to her limits.

So for the second time in a few months, Ranboo was thrown from his saddle just as he reached his destination. Unfortunately, this landing wasn't as comfortable as the last one on the beach, and the rough sandstone tore at his skin. Muttering to himself, he brushed his hands off and tried to scramble to his feet.

That however wasn't needed, as a helpful pair of hands pulled him up. Well, it was two pairs of hands to be exact, and they were anything but well-meaning. In fact, they yanked him up, the bottom half of his lanky figure still trailing on the floor.

"Second one in two days," one of the guards grumbled, giving the hybrid a sharp kick to his shin. "We should perhaps talk to Foolish about getting a gate made."

"Listen, I mean no trouble!" Ranboo yelled, too frantic to care about repercussions for his trespassing. The soldiers seemed to be ignoring him, and dragged him away. The

floor ripped the knees of his trousers, but he couldn't find the strength or the footholds to fight back. Instead, he remained as limp as a ragdoll as he was dragged through the lavish halls towards an unknown location, and only used his mouth to try and talk himself out of it. "I'm looking for someone! It's important! If you'd only let me look around for a bit, I'm sure—"

"Ranboo?"

He turned his head as the voice called his name, and stopped. His eyes grew wider. The soldiers were escorting him along the outskirts of an inner courtyard surrounded by plants and a thin moat of crystal blue water. A fountain sat in the middle, topped with an intricate golden statue of a shark with emerald eyes. A figure sat on one of the stone benches in the shade of a palm tree, with two other, smaller figures playfully rolling in the dust at his feet. He couldn't believe it... Why...? How...?

"Tubbo?" he called back, attempting to wriggle out of the guards' grasp. They still held him firmly, but did stop in their tracks. The hybrid tried to struggle again, earning him nothing but a threatening spear to his throat.

His cry had caught the attention of one of the little ones, who paused his game momentarily to watch what was going on. Then, in a flash, he was on his little feet and rushing towards him. "Ranboo!" he squealed.

Ranboo's heart was about to burst. "Michael?" he whispered, close to crying tears of joy.

"Ranboo?"

The next voice came from somewhere behind him, and he craned his neck. A short – only just a head or so taller than Tubbo – and bouncy character trotted towards him. "Puffy!"

The captain stopped in front of him. "Ranboo, what—"

He shook off the guards holding him up, who this time dropped their grip. Something about Puffy's presence must have changed something in them, and they stepped back. The hybrid ran to her, conscious of the fear gnawing at his insides. "I know you said you weren't here for me," he began in a hurry, the memories of their last interaction worming their way into his mind and promising to make this meeting extremely awkward. "But I'm not asking you to be! You said you'd stand by Sam, and he needs you now more than ever! Please!"

"Slow down," Puffy said, trying to pry his hands from her sleeves. "What's going on?"

"There's no time to explain in full, but everything is going downhill on the mainland!"

"Ranboo..." He anxiously noted her change in tone. "Sam and I, we—"

"You what?" He knew the answer before she even gave it, if her expression was anything to go off. "Nevermind ! Whatever happened between you two, you need to forget it! We need you!"

"For what? Ranboo, you're not making any sense!" Her hand gently tilted his head up to her, concern tainting her every movement.

Her inability to understand the seriousness of his request frustrated him, but at least she was treating him as she always had; gently and lovingly. That was when he realized that she had forgiven him, or had started to. He would have smiled and hugged her, if Tommy's blatant determination and insane behaviour didn't come back to him. "You need to come with me," he begged, this time pulling her hand. "Please!"

"Ranboo, I can't see Sam again." Her hand escaped his, and the captain stayed put.

"Are you scared of him?" Ranboo asked her, impatient.

"No, of course not."

"Then why can't you face him?"

Her silence spoke volumes, and he faltered. He thought about apologizing and was about to when she shook her head, a sad smile gracing her lips. "You wouldn't understand. You're still so young, Ranboo."

He brushed the last comment off. "If you're not doing it for him, then at least come for all the other lives at stake," he pleaded.

Puffy stopped him before he could grab her again. "You still haven't told me anything!" she exclaimed.

"It's too complicated," he sighed. "I just... I need someone to talk sense into Tommy! He's gone ballistic, and he's attempting to break into the prison, and he thinks he can be as great as Wilbur was, and—"

"Tommy?" a hushed voice quivered.

He turned his head, and crossed Tubbo's gaze. The young ram was staring up at him, cradling Michael in his arms. Ranboo had forgotten he was there, and felt a tightness rise in his throat. Not only had he forgotten Tubbo's presence, but he had also just realized that not everyone knew Tommy was back. In any other circumstances, he would have sat down and explained everything he was told in detail, but time was not on his side. He nodded quickly and turned back to Puffy.

Her reaction was far from what he had expected. She didn't seem shocked; in fact, from the way she closed her eyes and breathed out slowly, the revelation was more of a confirmation of suspicions she likely already had. The hard stare and the determination that had taken hold of her quickly banished all thoughts and theories from his mind. "Take me to him," she said, and Ranboo couldn't help but sigh in relief.

"Thank you," the hybrid whispered. Before he could stop himself, he hugged her tightly. Her soft hair and her fleece against his skin was comforting after so long, and he only squeezed her tighter. "Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

"Puffy, is everything alright?"

Ranboo let go of the captain, and faced the newcomer. His eyes widened, staring up at the huge, golden figure gazing down at him. He heard the guards kneel, and he realized with a gulp that Puffy's appearance hadn't been what had made them free him. Faced with what he rightly assumed was the temple's god, he clumsily ducked down on one knee. The fear of being smited where he stood for showing such disrespect began to nag at him.

"I have to go for a while," Puffy said, and Ranboo heard her confident, preppy little footsteps trot across the floor.

The hybrid risked a look up, and saw the sheep and the god talking comfortably with each other. He couldn't understand how she was so at ease with such a divine being, but then again, everyone he knew was a mystery. Puffy and Foolish were no different.

"Mom?" Tubbo's voice broke up the conversation, and he walked up to the captain.

Ranboo snapped to attention, confused. Mom? What was he talking about? He looked from Puffy to Tubbo, the question getting caught in his throat. Fortunately, one gentle cuddle between the two of them answered everything, or almost everything.

"I'll be back soon," she said, giving him a soft kiss on his forehead.

"Promise?"

"Promise." She gave Michael and Michelle a little peck each too, before turning back to the hybrid. "Let's go."

Ranboo nodded, and prepared to follow her out, when Tubbo suddenly called his name. "Ranboo!"

He turned around, flinching. He expected a harsh remark to be flung his way, and certainly not the smile that he was met with. "Y... Yes?"

Tubbo grinned. "That goes for you too," he said. "Promise you'll come back soon."

The hybrid felt his spirits lift, and he nodded too. "Yeah, no problem."

"Then we can talk."

The implication was clear, and Ranboo's heart sank a little. Nevertheless, he was delighted to once more find himself in Tubbo's good graces. "Sure." He grinned. "I'd like that."

With a final wave to Michael and Michelle – and another apologetic bow to Foolish for good measure – he followed Puffy out of the temple. A few minutes later, they were saddled on their respective horses, and took off into the desert. Their steeds' hooves thundered underneath them, and Ranboo tried to explain the situation to the best of his abilities.

It was hard. He kept getting sidetracked, but Puffy was always there to offer him encouragement and pull him back onto the right train of thought. He never realized how much he had missed confiding in her until he finally could once again. When he finished his explanation, one of the numerous Nether portals had blocked their path and they continued through, the hybrid ducking to avoid hitting his head on the obsidian frame. When they had regained their bearings, they galloped off once again, ignoring the cries of the Nether patrols warning them of a herd of ghasts in the area.

Dodging a few fireballs was nothing to Ranboo, not if they could save every precious second they could. He pushed his mare once again to her absolute limits, and he could tell Puffy was doing the same with her own, long-haired stallion. The piping

hot, crimson world was nothing but a blur. They were making haste as fast as they could.

Ranboo just hoped they were fast enough to save everyone.



Sam was surprised to find Dream already standing and alert when he pulled down the lava. From afar, the cell had never looked so cramped, and its prisoner so tall.

"Sam? What's going on?" Dream called with wide eyes.

Sam didn't answer right away, and stepped onto the moving bridge. "They're storming the Vault," he replied as soon as his foot touched solid ground. Without wasting a second, he turned his back to the prisoner and snapped to attention, his trident at the ready. A sharp chill shot down his back, and he momentarily regretted taking off his chest plate and cloak. He realized a second later that it wouldn't have helped either way, as the chill was not from the cold, but his own, irrational fear.

"They? Who's they?"

Sam barely glanced back. "Tommy and his allies."

"What allies? What happened? What did you do?"

The warden cast a look at the prisoner. "Why is *that* your first question?"

"I brought him back and now he turned against you, why else would I ask that question?" Dream retorted. "Why aren't you defending the prison?"

"I am, but I've done all I can. Now, my job is to protect something else."

"Protect what?"

"Protect *you*, Dream," Sam snapped back. "They want your head!"

The prisoner looked stunned. "And you're not going to let them take it?"

The warden gripped his trident tighter. "Not if I can help it."

There was a long silence, broken only by the distant booming of the canons. "Thank you," Dream's voice echoed, small and hushed.

Sam lingered for a bit, then nodded sharply. Without a word, he faced the lava chasm again. When the army arrived, they were going to come from that entrance. There was no other way to get into the holding cell. He stood up straight once again, tense and rigid. "I want you to know that I'm not doing this for you, but for all the people you could save with your revival knowledge," he added, shifting.

"I figured." Dream didn't sound surprised.

Of course he wasn't; Sam knew he had been very clear with his "charity" towards him, and that the only thing still keeping him from slaughtering the prisoner was the knowledge he held. That's what he kept telling himself, and ignoring the part of him that glimpsed the friend he once treasured dearly. In an effort to banish those thoughts, he tensed up until his muscles were strained.

"Sam, you need to relax. They're not going to get in: this place is impenetrable, you said so yourself."

Dream was clearly trying to reassure him, but Sam couldn't take it. He broke. "What if it isn't?" he gasped. "What if they get in and kill us all? What if everything I've built and worked towards ends up being for nothing?"

"I strongly doubt that," the prisoner replied. "Just calm down. Don't make this any more stressful than it has to be." Dream was the one in the most danger; how was he staying so calm, and why was he bothering to try and comfort Sam, the man who had caused so much grief towards him?

"Alright, fine. I'm calm." The warden breathed in and out. He dropped his weapon and stood at ease, letting the bottom rest against the floor. He rolled his shoulders, trying to relax the tight muscles there. "I'm calm."

None of them spoke, both caught up in their own things. Sam was keeping a watchful eye out for any particular danger, and from the shuffling, he could tell that Dream was doing... something behind his back. He didn't think too much of it, instead choosing to focus on the war raging out outside the walls. The feeble sound of footsteps echoed above the lava dispensers, and the warden turned his gaze to them.

The prisoner must have heard them as well, as he asked; "Who's that?"

"Bad and Ant. I hired them as prison guards."

"Huh. Bad did tell me that he wanted to become a guard," Dream said thoughtfully.

"When?"

"When he visited me, a while back. He said he wanted to make my cell more comfortable to live in."

There was a bitterness in his tone that Sam managed to place quite quickly. Clearly, Dream had been holding up hopes that the demon would eventually stay true to his promise, only to find out that all these months, nothing had come of it. It wasn't even a matter of the warden blocking any suggestions: Bad hadn't brought up any ideas in the first place, on the day he was hired or any time after that. A small bit of empathy leaked through Sam's tough exterior. "I'm... I'm sorry to hear that, Dream."

"So much for an old friendship..."

The warden fell silent for a moment. "Yeah," he whispered.

Perhaps, after all of this, he could be a bit more lenient with Dream's living conditions. Not going as far as giving him a luxury apartment, but just adding a few things. Like a bed. He found himself wondering what sleeping against a cold, rough wall for a year felt like. The realization that the conditions were beyond inhumane unsettled Sam, and even more when he realized that he hadn't done anything to fight against their implementation. Dream had suggested them, sure, but everything was finalized by Sam himself.

He didn't know what exactly had snapped in him that day, if not the prison's chains around his heart crumbling and his warden's mask slipping. It felt good to feel somewhat sane again.

"You know, Sam; I've always seen you as a friend," Dream suddenly piped up, catching Sam's attention. He kept his eyes locked on the entrance, but listened carefully to what the prisoner had to say. "Even when you locked me up in here, I still cared for you. We had some good times together, back then. We did... But my instincts are telling me I should hate you."

"With good reason," Sam replied, speaking nothing but the truth. The prisoner's confession had touched him, and the regrets continued to pile. "I never got to properly thank you for bringing back Tommy. I mean, I know you murdered him in the first place, but you managed to fix it a little." He paused.

What was he saying? Tommy's murder was unforgivable, and would always be etched into Dream's stone list of many heinous crimes. Fix it? Some good that did... Now

the boy was attacking the Vault and out for Sam's blood. The very thought made him shiver, and a sadness overwhelmed him. He still wasn't comfortable enough with Dream to let him see it, and stayed with his back to him.

In an attempt to hide his emotions, he went on. "Even if... what came of it, what's happening right now is my fault, I'm still grateful. I made mistakes, just like you, and was never forgiven for them. I'm not defending you as a warden, but as your friend." He paused, before being more honest than he ever had been with his old friend. "My instincts are saying I should hate you too, but I don't. Not as much as I should, anyway."

"See, that's the difference between you and me, Sam."

In a sudden change of tone, Dream's voice had turned as sharp and smooth as a knife's blade. Sam's heart began to beat faster, for a reason unknown. "What is?" he asked.

Suddenly, there was a chiming tinkle of breaking glass that echoed around the walls of the cell. The warden made a move to look around, but was too slow.

Way too slow.

Sam was yanked back by his shoulders, and he lost his footing. The trident was ripped from his grasp, and he fell – hard. His head crashed into the obsidian wall and he let out a loud cry. The impact was sharp and ringing, and the pain began to pulsate inside his brain, growing with each passing second. For a moment, a veil of white descended in front of his eyes, and he lost all feeling. It only lasted for a second, however, as something strong planted itself on his chest. He struggled to breathe, the pressure threatening to shatter his rib cage like fine porcelain through his frail leather armour. He looked up, desperately fighting to push out a single wheeze. His blood ran cold when he saw the attacker crushing his chest with a superhuman force.

Dream's eyes pierced through his, dangerous and vicious. "The difference is that I always give in to my instincts," he sneered.

Sam thrashed around, trying to break free, and that's when he felt it. The abrupt, unmistakable shock of a weapon finding its mark.

Chapter Forty-Six: Dream's Escape

It didn't hurt, not at first. It felt like he had been brutally punched in the gut, and the air had been knocked out of him.

If it wasn't for the cold, hard smoothness against his skin, he would have dared to fight back. He would have lashed out and broken free, kicking his attacker backwards and cracking his skull on the exact same spot of the wall where Tommy's had been.

Sam didn't look down, but he knew that he couldn't risk making a single move. It would only make things worse. It would only...

It...

He dragged his hands over his body, soaking his fingertips with the blood that had painted a masterpiece across his stomach. His trident had never felt so sharp, and so impossibly heavy. He weakly wrapped his fingers around the first prong he felt, and began to pull. It was no use. His arms didn't have any strength left in them. His grasp slipped, staining the inside of his palms with red.

He wasn't breathing. He didn't *feel* like he was breathing. All his brain could focus on was the wetness coating his hands, and the poisonous green eyes glaring at him.

Sam felt the prisoner yank something again, and he couldn't help but cry out as he was jostled. He heard the belt around his hips snap, and Dream held up the ring of keys up to his eyes. They were tainted with the same blood on Sam's hands, but the prisoner seemed far from fazed. The paper-thin cuts and scars from Quackity's switchblade had never been more visible, dashed across his face like pale, smudged stars.

"I tried to be your friend, Sam!" His snake-like hissing echoed inside of the warden's head, and he tried to pry at the trident again. "I tried to stay nice with you, gripping onto the last, fleeting hope that you were still my old friend! I brushed off every wound you inflicted, every harsh word you threw my way, but you never changed. Heck, even Tommy's death brought nothing but your selfishness!"

Sam didn't care what Dream had to say. All he wanted was the three, sharp prongs out of his abdomen. He grit his teeth, fighting the screams that choked him.

The pain, the pain, the pain...

His knees began to buckle but he struggled on, using the wall as an anchor. His hands slipped, and his throat continued to swell with his swallowed yells and the pounding of his heart.

The trident was removed – a gesture that should have promised sweet, sweet release and bliss. Instead, it was torn violently, threatening to take the rest of the warden's insides with it. Sam didn't even have the energy to cry out in agony, and his body met the rough, jagged floor a mere moment later.

Immediately as he fell, he tried to stay collected. With one hand, he shakily propped himself up and with the other, he clutched his bleeding wound, groping the mess of flesh and clothes together as if his life depended on it, and it did. He couldn't tell how deep the wounds ran, or give himself a life-expectancy. He couldn't even tell how much blood he was losing. Everything sounded loud, way too loud; from the footsteps to the scraping of his trident against the uneven floor to his own, painful gasps.

He only raised his head when he heard the unmistakable, staccato creak of the redstone bridge and soon after, the gush of the dispensers as the lava began to flood into the outer-chamber once again. Sam desperately dragged himself to the edge. "Dream!" he yelled as loud as he could.

Dream watched from the other side of the chasm, one hand gripped around the lever and one around the warden's own trident, soaked with its owner's blood. He stared, but he stayed where he was. Motionless and hateful, his mouth pressed into thin line. That expression told Sam more than Dream's words could ever, or would ever. Even the evil smile so many feared was simple, a mask, a façade, but the pursed lips were genuine. He despised Sam with every fiber of his being.

The warden wasn't even given the honour of a goodbye, or a triumphant gloat of any sort. When the lava finally sealed him in, the footsteps began to fade. The prisoner had made his exit with as much decorum as the warden would on the regular, except now Sam understood how terrifying it really was. The jangling keys, the heavy steps, and the banging of his trident as it was deliberately scraped against the walls.

The powerlessness was overwhelming, and Sam finally knew what it felt like to be truly shackled within Pandora's Vault.



The hallways had never felt airier. The walls had never seemed so bright, and Dream's spirits had never been higher.

The cool, rough floor should have stung his bare feet, but after months of walking on nothing but a jagged carpet of obsidian, he was used to the cuts and the bruises. He

hadn't seen the rest of the prison for so long, but he knew the floorplan like the back of his hand. He had poured over the blueprints during its construction, and had analyzed every nook and cranny when he was arrested and escorted through the corridors, searching for a possible escape route.

He took the warden's passages, using the keys now in his possession to open the doors and raise the security measures. It was tedious, but it would be fulfilling in the end. Dream knew that for a fact.

There were a couple of close calls with Bad and Antfrost, who were roaming the halls and searching for the warden. Dream stayed in the shadows, waiting until they passed before continuing his journey.

Finally, he reached the front lobby and the Nether portal leading outside. His key to freedom. *Not yet.* He turned back, and opened a hidden door behind the desk. It creaked loudly, and had clearly not been touched for so long.

Dream emerged into a room that looked quite like the other ones in the prison: cold, clammy and dark. This one, however, was the one he had waited to set foot in all this time. He made his way to a corner of the room, past the numerous fortified lockers made up of secured chests. Every single key belonging to every single one of them hung from the ring hooked around Dream's hand. He had never felt so powerful.

He finally stopped at the container right at the end, and tried a couple of keys in the padlocks before one worked. He turned it, got rid of the locks, and flung the chest open. It hit the obsidian wall behind it with a bang, bringing up clouds of light grey dust. One they had died down and Dream had stopped coughing, he looked down.

The purple tint of a netherite axe caught his attention, followed by the silver string of a powerful bow. Poison-tipped arrows glistened in a leather quiver, and a satchel of golden apples peeked out behind it.

Nestled on a mound of forest green material, a circle stared back at Dream. It was plain and white, except for the hairline cracks running through it and the simple, painted smile on the scratched surface; a wide grin that could only match its owner's own.

Dream picked it up, and lifted it over his own face. The straps fit snugly around his head, and the mask felt cool when pressed against his forehead. He smiled.

I'm back.



Sam shakily drew his hand from his stomach, holding it up to his eyes. It was sticky and caked with thick, vacuous liquid as red as the Egg's tendrils. He choked, and immediately pushed it back to his wound. He didn't know if it was to keep applying pressure to his injury, or to remove the reality of his predicament from his sight.

He tried to shuffle into a position where he'd be more comfortable, as the obsidian ridges began to imprint painfully on his hand. He moved, and cried out. Something sharp had impaled his palm. He stared at the new wound, and froze when he saw a glass shard sticking out. The rim began to bleed, and he quickly pulled it out with his teeth before spitting it out of his way. He looked down, and saw the remains of a glass vial at his feet. Small drops of a dark pink liquid still tainted the shards. Sam recognized the potion immediately, as he too carried them on him.

He carried them on him, but Dream couldn't. Dream shouldn't have been able to. How did... How...

His head began to hurt, and the warden pushed himself against the nearest wall. Feebly fumbling in the small pouch still miraculously hanging from the remains of his belt, his hand closed around a couple of vials. Pulling them out, he found himself praying, and he inspected their contents with as much scrutiny as his weakened state allowed him too.

A copper orange, and a dark magenta. Fire Resistance, and Strength.

No Healing. *No Healing.*

In his panic to prepare for the Vault's imminent attack, he had misplaced and had forgotten to take the *one* potion that could have been of use to him. The *one potion* that could have saved his remaining lives.

Cursing himself with a series of incoherent mumbles, he uncorked the Strength potion, and let a small drop slip down his throat. His fingers shook like leaves, and he quickly closed the container again before another accident could occur.

His insides squirmed as the brew began to work part of its magic – furiously rejecting the unnatural medicine he had ingested – and an ounce of strength returned to his body. It was enough for him to find his voice, but not enough for him to stop wasting every single, precious breath of air. The heat from the lava was stifling; every

whiff tasted like ash. Every pop resonated in his ears, accumulating like faraway chatter growing closer.

Closer, and closer, and closer.

It wasn't the lava.

"Bad..." With no hesitation, as soon he heard the pairs of footsteps and the words spoken on the other side of the burning divide, Sam gathered up all his strength, and screamed as loud as his weakened state would let him. "BAD!"

The noises stopped, and the warden held his throat. Scratchy and raw, his vocal chords felt like they were about to snap.

But, thank the gods, he was heard. "Sam!?" He had never been so happy to hear the demon's voice. It was as sweet to his ears as Bad's muffins were to his taste buds. "What—"

Sam got straight to the point, yelling once more. "DREAM! HE ESCAPED! LOCK ALL THE GATES! SEND A MESSAGE TO TOMMY, TO EVERYONE! DREAM—" He coughed violently, and he momentarily let go of his wound to fumble with the potion bottle again. He took another sip, this time downing a quarter of the bottle. It wasn't the best decision, but he needed to get his guards to help, urgently.

"SAM! What's wrong?" Bad sounded beyond concerned, and Sam could vividly picture the worry in his eyes and movements, or at least what his muddled brain allowed him to imagine.

"He... He..." Sam gulped down a lungful of sweltering and suffocating air. He felt like his lungs were ready to drop through the wound in his abdomen and slip out of his body. "Get me out of here... There's a way around the redstone if you don't have the keys, just..." Of course they didn't have any spares: Dream had stolen the only set in existence, and the warden's stubbornness deterred him from giving his guards a copy each when he hired them. He held a hand to his head, racking his now hazy brain. "Just let me remember..."

Redstone, redstone, redstone. He remembered every machine he had ever built, memorized every circuit he was taught, and every aspect of engineering he had encountered. This would be a breeze. It *would* have been a breeze if his mind hadn't mixed all his knowledge into one, chaotic mess of red, and unknown words and shapes.

He couldn't think straight. The loss of blood was making him light-headed, even with the Strength potion's effects pumping through his bloodstream.

"Take your time, Sam!" Ant's voice joined the conversation, and the warden couldn't be more relieved. "We're on standby– Bad?"

Even from behind the wall of lava and with no visuals on his guards, Sam could feel the tension change. His heart sank, threatening to escape and give up on him just as his lungs were striving to do. An uncomfortable, trickling sensation ran down his skin, and it wasn't the blood from his wound. He could almost feel the demon's clawed hand tighten around Antfrost's furry arm. "Ant?" he called tentatively. "Bad?" What was taking them so long to answer?

"No, no... This... Ant, it's too late... We can't save him."

Too late? *Oh no. Oh no, no, no...* "It's not too late!" the warden leapt in, desperate. "Just let me... let me..." He screwed his eyes shut and tried to concentrate on the redstone circuits again. He'd find the right one, he had to. His life depended on it.

Yet it seemed his plea had fallen on deaf ears. "What do you mean?" Ant mewled.

"If... If the Egg wants him to live, he wouldn't be in this situation," Bad replied, and Sam understood. "The Egg is making a selection."

It was nonsense. It was irrational. It was *happening*. The gravity of his situation was weighed down with another blanket of dread and understanding. "Bad!" He reached out for them through the lava, only to recoil with a cry when a white-hot agony burned the tips of his fingers. "Let me out! This isn't funny!"

Again, they ignored him. Why were they ignoring him? They couldn't ignore him! Ant's voice cut off his pleas. "Why is the Egg leaving him? I thought he was loyal."

I was never loyal to the Egg! Despite the situation, Sam couldn't help but viciously deny his involvement, at least to himself. So he thought.

"So did I—" Bad began, only to cut himself off mid-sentence. Sam held his breath, awaiting the rest. It was as if he had just realized something, or... *Or someone had just spoken to him.* The warden turned as still as a statue, and the mocking jeers in his ears confirmed his stomach-sinking suspicions. He never thought he'd see the day where his own thoughts would be heard and would betray him. "You never liked the Egg, did you Sam?" Bad's tone was just as icy and dangerous as Dream's had been.

Sam was frantic, realizing his mistake too late. "NO! PLEASE! I LOVE IT, I REALLY DO! LET ME OUT!" If there were iron bars in this damned cell, he would have gripped them until his bones snapped. "I'M ONE OF YOU!"

A silence fell soon after; a silence of reflection. He held in a small, painful breath.

"You're lying. You were never a part of the Eggpire. I thought we could trust you..."

"I AM A PART OF THE EGGPIRE, REMEMBER?" he screamed. "THE BADLANDS AND THE EGGPIRE ARE THE SAME THING! YOU SAID SO—"

"You're a traitor."

A traitor. No. Not after everything he had done, everything he had gone along with and everything he had lost. Sam spat back as hard and as angrily as his wound allowed him to. "Ant! Talk some sense into—"

"Traitor..." The cat's purr was unmistakable. The only one in the Eggpire that was on the warden's side and still held some sense of rationality – or so it had seemed – had given up on him. Had turned against him.

"You can't do this!" Sam yelled again. "I'm one of you! I'm your friend! There wouldn't be the Badlands without me by your side!" He knew he should have saved his breath, as the battle was lost. He knew it as soon as he began to beg again, pleading for a sweet release from someone other than Death.

"Traitors to the Egg don't deserve to live," Bad snarled. "If Dream hadn't got to you first, we would have hung you from the same gallows we have ready for the Captain."

"DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HER!" Sam roared. "DO WHATEVER YOU WANT TO ME, BUT IF YOU DARE LAY A SINGLE FINGER ON ANYONE I LO—" He doubled over, the sting of his wound shutting him up.

"C'mon Ant, duty calls."

"Dream, you mean?"

"No." There was a chuckle. "No, he's far gone by now, I should think. The era of Pandora's Vault is over, and we're no longer in its service."

"There's an opening at the top of the south-east tower," Ant said. "If we angle our pearls right and throw hard enough, we could hit the unoccupied beach and make our way up to the moor from there."

"That's a good idea," Bad mused. "Let's get out of here."

"BAD! ANTFROST!" The footsteps began to fade. "COME BACK! DON'T LEAVE ME IN HERE!" Again, Sam's threats and his pleas were met by the closed minds of corrupted, arrogant disciples. Remorse wasn't a language they understood, at least not anymore.

The warden felt his insides squirm and rip themselves apart, attempting to counter the potion keeping him alive. Another sip seemed so tempting, but he resisted. That small vial was keeping him alive, and he couldn't waste it. Instead, he took the biggest breath he could, attempting to stay calm, and lay down.

His back was to the lava, he should have felt warm. Instead he felt cold. So... so cold, his skin pale and frozen like ice. He continued to clench his wound until it hurt even more. The pain made him dizzy, but that was better. Much better than making him pass out.

He *couldn't* pass out. He *couldn't* close his eyes. He *couldn't* allow himself to. If he fell asleep... It would only cement one of his many graves.

His eyelids grew heavy. He tried to fight them. They were stronger, or so it seemed at first.

It seemed they'd win, until...

"Sam!"

A voice. A voice he hadn't heard for weeks. One he missed. One that made his heart ache with regret, but one that forced him awake.

The name couldn't even reach his lips in time before she knelt down at his side. "I'm here," she whispered, holding his hand with a tenderness he hadn't felt anywhere else before.

He forced his fingers to latch around hers, holding on for dear life. A dear life that was leaking out of him like a faucet, and now she was here, he didn't want to lose a single drop of it, of himself, of her.

"I'm sorry," he managed to push out. Sorry for so many things, he couldn't list them all. "I'm sorry..."

"We're here now," another voice murmured. Long, black and white fingers pressed themselves onto the bleeding wound. The touch was feather-light, Sam couldn't feel the agony anymore. He sighed in relief.

"Thank you, thank you..." His grip around her hand tightened, while his other hand reached for his young and lanky savior, still dripping with blood.

Something pressed against his side. Someone. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there. The smell of the outdoors enveloped him with every touch; clear springs, crisp yellow fields, nighttime bonfires and all the figure stood for: freedom. The sickly sweet aroma of roses draped his senses with sheets upon sheets of soft gold and bright blue skies. The new addition still said nothing, which was unusual, but his mere presence was enough for the warden.

For a moment, he lay there, surrounded by three of the people he'd give his life for in a heartbeat. A heartbeat was all that remained.

What were they doing here? He hadn't heard them enter. They couldn't have entered, the Vault was locked down. They couldn't be here—

They couldn't be here.

He tried gripping Puffy's hand once more, but all he caught between his burned and bloody fingers was the clammy air of the prison cell. He tried to open his eyes to glimpse Ranboo again, only to be met with a void. He inhaled, desperate to sense Tommy's presence before everything faded out.

None of it amounted to anything, and he continued to sink, alone. He fell and fell, until a jolt ripped out a final breath.



The burning.

That was what first reached Ranboo as he and Captain Puffy rode on through the moorland. The heavy grey smell of ash and fire tingled his nostrils. He sneezed.

The noise.

That was what reached him next. The cries, the clatters, the booming of the deadly cannons. Every sound he was trying to run away from was drawing closer and closer, and he was this close to turning his steed around and bolting in the opposite direction.

And finally, the view.

The view was unlike anything he had ever seen and even his companion faltered as they stepped their horses over the hill.

Pandora's Vault was a blazing orange bonfire, coated with lava and shining as brightly as the sun and the evening star. With only the black tips of the guard towers visible, peeping cautiously out of the fire, it was a sight to behold. A dangerous and threatening sight, and showed just how much trouble this entire campaign was causing for both sides.

Staring down onto the beachfront, the two newcomers watched the military camp smoulder and burn, broken down by projectiles fired from across the sea. The earth and the sand were upturned by both the landing cannonballs and the feet of the soldiers darting back and forth as they attempted to stop the fires from spreading. Down across the waves, the wooden piers looked decidedly worse for wear, a couple of them seeming like they were ready to buckle against the lashing of the rough ocean waves and the weight of the army, the barricades and the artillery. Ranboo squinted at the soldiers in question. He searched his brain briefly, certain that there were more of them when he left...

He soon realized that there *were* more beforehand, and he gulped. What had happened since he left? What had Tommy done?

Speaking of the boy, Ranboo finally found him standing on the highest point of the central barricade, occasionally ducking behind it when a cannonball came flying his way but mostly barking frantic orders at his men. The madman himself, and he clearly hadn't retrieved any sanity since the hybrid left his side.

He pointed down at him and turned to Puffy. "He's there," he said.

He expected the captain to falter once she saw the carnage and the living boy, one she had mourned so bitterly, but she didn't. "Don't worry, Ranboo," she muttered, her tone as cold as ice. Her eyes were narrowed, and her back was straight. That surprised him. "I see him clear as day..."

As soon as she had finished, she spurred her horse down to the camp without a second thought. Ranboo's surprise turned to shock and he spluttered, trying to call her back. When she didn't acknowledge him, he galloped after her with a nervous cry.

Nothing seemed to startle the captain. The smoke, the fire, the flying debris, the wails of the wounded; everything was passed by without a second thought. Meanwhile, Ranboo needed all his wits about him to stomach the scene, and all his self-restraint to not throw up and add to the putrid smells already wafting around the battlefield.

Puffy's gaze and her horse's speed never wavered, until they reached the edge of the pier. She jumped off and marched right through the carnage, shoving any of the soldiers who tried to question her to the side. She scrambled up the barricade, right underneath Tommy.

Before Ranboo knew what was happening, she had grabbed the boy's ear, and dragged him down the debris.

Tommy yelped in fear and reached for his weapons, only for the captain to violently swat his hand away. "Tommy, what the fuck are you doing?!"

Ranboo had never heard Puffy swear before, and he took a step back with his pointy ears flattened like a dog's. He wasn't the one being yelled at, but he still felt the sheer power of the captain's wrath.

"OW! Let go!" Tommy yelled, scrambling across the wooden decks. "What the fucking hell is wrong with you?" The troops beside him watched him, sharing confused and embarrassed looks, and the boy's face was turning red.

The captain dragged him to a safer spot on the mainland, right in front of Ranboo. That was when she finally let his ear go, and furiously stood with her arms crossed, squaring up to the boy in all her short glory. Even with the noticeable size difference, the sheep was intimidating beyond belief and Ranboo felt somewhat sorry for Tommy. That changed soon after as he remembered why the mighty general was being disciplined like a small child in the first place.

"I think the real question is what's wrong with *you*," Puffy chided, jabbing a finger to his chest. The hybrid thought he saw Tommy flinch, although that could have quite easily just been a trick of the rumbling ground beneath them.

Tommy took a step back and stood up straight. He arrogantly tugged down his coat, glaring at the captain and trying to reclaim his fallen dignity. "Nothing's wrong with me," he spat. "I'm fine!"

"Stop pretending you're sane!" Puffy retorted. "No sane person would do this!" She gestured to the carnage around them. "What the heck are you trying to achieve?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," he replied. "You haven't been through what I have!"

"I don't care if you came back from the dead or were crowned the bloody King of the Greater SMP! That doesn't give you the right to drag all these poor souls down with you!"

There was a flash of remorse that crossed the boy's gaze, and Ranboo's breath hitched. There were indeed losses, as he had suspected. How many was the real question, but he had a feeling that the boy wasn't going to reveal that, especially now that he was being told off. It could have been either because he was scared that Puffy would get even angrier, or maybe it was just his arrogance that stopped him from proving her point.

"I'm not to blame," Tommy growled. "If Sam had just cooperated-"

"Oh no, don't you *dare* blame him for this!" she tutted. "He's not the one who made you fire at his prison! That's your fault entirely, and you need to start taking some responsibility for your actions, young man!"

Tommy blew his top. "You don't know what it was like in the afterlife!" he yelled. "No one knows! The Revive Book isn't worth it! It isn't *worth it*, Puffy, and Sam doesn't understand that!" The yell became a scream. "HE'S MAKING ME SUFFER!"

"That's probably because you never explained why."

Ranboo's admiration for Captain Puffy was beyond words. He was in awe of the way she could stand up to the most heinous forces and angriest tantrums, and simultaneously soften and offer reassurance to those who needed it. Tommy was both cases, and Puffy knew how to deal with him. At least, it appeared that she knew how to at least talk to him; calming and deterring him from storming Pandora's Vault was another task entirely.

The hybrid turned his attention back to Tommy just as the boy's shoulders slumped. "He doesn't listen," he replied.

Puffy smiled sadly. "I know Sam," she said gently. "He loves you like his own son, Tommy, and he'd listen no matter what."

"He doesn't care for me. No one does."

"He does, he does so much. Both of us do, and we always will." She tried approaching Tommy again, and this time, he didn't try to push her away. "If I didn't love you, I wouldn't have come to you as soon as Ranboo came to get me."

"Ranboo?"

The hybrid's name was spoken coldly, and he perked up. Tommy's piercing blue eyes glared at him. He gulped.

"I was told you were getting reinforcements."

His long fingers found the longer strands of his hair again. "Well, I—"

"Bitch."

With one word, their entire, truthful friendship came crumbling down again, and it hurt. But it hurt Ranboo less than perhaps it should have. "I care for you too, Tommy," he ventured. "And that's why I went to find Puffy. You can't throw your last life away in an impossible battle only to achieve nothing!"

His words, just like Tommy's actions, achieved nothing, and the boy promptly ignored him. "I'm going to get into that prison one way or another," he said, his attention turned back to Puffy.

"Tommy, I think we both know that's not happening."

"It *will* if I am allowed to continue with this campaign, thank you very much!" He rolled up the sleeves of his coat and made a move to rush head on back into the warzone.

Puffy stepped in front of him, and so did Ranboo, barring his path. "Then you're definitely not getting in," the captain said.

The hybrid nodded. "Not if we can help it." His mismatched eyes burned through his friend. "You're making a mistake, Tommy, and who knows what the consequences could be?"

"I'm not--"

"I could go and talk to Sam," Puffy said, interrupting the boy mid-whine. "I can negotiate with him for you, and we can find a compromise." There was a slight tremble in her voice as she said so, but Ranboo wasn't about to draw any attention to it.

Instead, he watched as Tommy faltered, his gaze panning from Puffy to the Vault. His forehead creased in deep thought.

"Tommy, you can't throw anyone else's lives away for this," Ranboo whispered, letting the boy know that he knew what had happened, or part of it.

Tommy turned back and, to their surprise, nodded. "Fine. Go and talk to him."

"Call off your soldiers and cease fire."

"I can't, they're bloodthirsty." He shrugged. "Sam was at least right about something..."

Ranboo heard him grumble the last part under his breath. He sighed, and allowed himself to relax at least a little. "At least we can start dealing with this in a more diplomatic way..."

"Shut it, Ender boy," Tommy snarled at him, snarky and rude. He yanked him down to his height and hissed in his ear. "You're the cause of all this shit. If you hadn't run off, this would have been a success!"

This time, however, the hybrid stood his ground. "Responsibility, Tommy," he replied simply, standing back up straight. The glare in the boy's eyes was unlike anything he had seen before, but that was okay.

He smugly looked back at Puffy, who seemed just as impressed with him as he was himself. "Well," she said, confident once more. "Shall we?"

With a nod, Ranboo followed her as she made her way through the remains of the camp, weaving in and out of the falling debris and the holes in the ground. He could hear Tommy trailing behind him with heavy, reluctant steps and uttered curses along

with other insults. They made their way to the Vault's entrance, only picking up their pace when a cannonball slammed down beside them, way too close for comfort.

Once they arrived, they found another group of Tommy's soldiers attempting to break through the bars with blunt saws and by shooting bullets at the lock. The boy took his place at the head of the little trio, and waved his men away. Immediately, they dispersed, letting their commander and the two others with him through. Again, Ranboo hated being the center of attention, and slouched as he passed, offering feeble mumbles of thanks to the crowds around them. Tommy and Puffy, in stark contrast, held their heads high, and the captain's walk quickened. Once arrived at the gates, she bent down beside the lock.

Ranboo watched, intrigued, as she inspected it, then stood back and gave it a strong kick. They swung open immediately, to everyone's surprise. She must have sensed the stares, as she turned back and shrugged. "The bullets were the right way to go," she said, and rushed into the entryway. Tommy and Ranboo ran after her, towards the Nether portal at the other end. Their only way into the Vault.

It wasn't lit, just as they had expected, but another question was brought up soon after. "How are we going to talk to him?" Ranboo asked.

"We just need to get a message through, somehow."

"Great, thanks Puffy. Crazy helpful input right there," Tommy grumbled. "The question is: how the fuck are we going to do that?"

"Don't get snarky with me," the captain shot back. "We wouldn't be in this situation if—"

"If I hadn't decided to put my foot down and take matters into my own hands, I know."

Ranboo sighed, his gaze flitting from one friend to the other, like he was watching a tennis match. He stayed quiet, fortunately. It wasn't like he had anything to say, and he definitely didn't want to risk making things worse than they already were.

Puffy glared at the boy once again. "Stop acting like the victim here, Tommy. Your insolence clearly knows no limits."

"It's not insolence, Captain Pussy. I'm just pointing out the facts," he replied, rolling his eyes.

"Call me Captain Pussy again and you'll get much more than just an earache from me."

"PLEASE!" Ranboo suddenly cried out, stepping between them. With his back to the portal, he yelled at them each in turn. "JUST... STOP!" Faced with their gaping expressions at his outburst, he resisted the urge to cower away and instead stood up straight. "Your arguing isn't going to help anything!"

They continued to gape at him, and Ranboo calmed down. They looked so shocked and so utterly scared of him. So much so, in fact, that it scared him too.

"I'm sorry!" He clapped his hands in front of his mouth and hunched over once more. "I didn't mean to yell."

"Ranboo—"

"It's just... I don't know what's wrong with me, but I suddenly felt a burst of—"

"RANBOO!"

Tommy's hand shot out and yanked the hybrid towards him. He tripped and bumped into the boy's decidedly shorter figure. He awaited a harsh reprimand or an insult, but he got none. Instead, Tommy's gaze was still trained on a point in the distance, and so was Puffy's.

The hybrid didn't understand, until he turned his attention and— *wait a minute*. The portal wasn't always lit... was it? He blinked, incredulous.

He was certain that it wasn't, and he was even more certain that there hadn't been a figure there either. With green clothes and a trident, Sam should have been the one stepping out of the portal.

Except it wasn't.



Blood.

Lava.

Dark, black stone.

Canons.

Tragedy.

Betrayal.

It was all too much.

"Karl?"

He barely felt George's grasp on him. The fishing rod fell out of his hands, and he almost tumbled face-first into the lake below. The koi carps nervously gathered at the water's edge, forming a blurred painting of orange, black and white as Kinoko's leader crumbled before them into the damp grass.

Karl Jacobs could barely focus on any of his surroundings, his head whirring with a glare as dark and foreboding as the hells written up over the centuries. If it wasn't for his friend holding him up, he would have died then and there. "George...?"

"I'm here," the fallen king replied, still holding on to him. "Are you alright?"

Was he alright? Karl didn't know whether to laugh in relief because his painful visions had finally been proven to be true, or cry over the fact that now, the world was going to be plunged into another round of painstaking warfare and chaos.

"The Box, George," he sighed, tears pricking the corners of his eyes. "Pandora's Box has finally opened."



"Sorry, is this the outside portal?" a masked figure asked them, the purple plasma cascading off his shoulders as he stepped out.

No one spoke, fixated on the scene. The hybrid's confidence disappeared as suddenly as it had come, and his free hands shot out to clamp themselves around his two friends. This had to be a nightmare, a twisted hallucination the enderwalk had triggered. It... It had to be. But when Tommy gripped his arm back and didn't shove him off, he knew it was something so much more serious.

"Boys, get behind me," Puffy muttered through gritted teeth, shoving the two youngest behind her back. With a swift hiss, she drew out her cutlass and pointed it at the newcomer. With his fingers anxiously gripping the captain's shoulder, Ranboo could

feel her tremble. He couldn't blame her, his own stomach and tail tying themselves into knots.

Dream turned back to the portal, and shoved something into a small hole on the side. He turned it, and the portal's plasma shattered. Then, he sharply yanked, and something broke. He took a step forward. "I think I asked you a question, didn't I?" His voice echoed from behind the white mask he was so renowned for. "Am I outside the Vault?"

The trio took a few steps back, their gazes still glued to the figure. With his hood up and his cloak covering the rest of him, he looked like a phantom, a ghoul dressed in vibrant colours that should have been comforting. It wasn't. Not in the slightest. Ranboo didn't know what was worse: not seeing the dangerous smirk undoubtedly chiselled on his features or merely imagining it.

"Ranboo..." Tommy's voice, quiet and hushed, reached his ears. The boy tugged at his sleeve. "Dream... Dream didn't have a trident, right...?"

The hybrid's gaze was drawn to the weapon in question. He didn't know... Why was Tommy asking him? He wouldn't remember? What was so important about him having one or not? Tommy was clearly ignoring the bigger elephant in the room. "... I don't know..." he stammered, gulping. "I don't know..."

"It's not his..."

When Puffy uttered those words, Ranboo finally noticed the red. Not only the red ribbon tied around the trident's handle – that he immediately recognized – but the dripping scarlet that ran down from the prongs.

He drew in a shaky breath, but he couldn't let it out. If he did, a scream would accompany it, and he couldn't have that. Not now, no matter how much he wanted to.

"It's Sam's."

There was no discernible reaction from the captain when she spoke: no emotion in her tone, and no movement in her body. Simply a trembling that seemed to increase. A shaking so violent that Ranboo was scared she was going to collapse, and his grip on her turned tighter.

It was simultaneously to hold her up, but also to stop her from lunging if she chose to do so. "Puffy, what do we do?" Ranboo asked her, terrified.

She didn't answer him, all her attention still fixated on the bloody weapon Dream held in his hand. "It's Sam's..." she repeated, oblivious to her previous statement. Her voice cracked, and the hybrid noticed that the arm that held her cutlass drooped.

"Puffy?" he probed again. He couldn't lose her now, not when him and Tommy were counting on her protection. Well, at least he was. Tommy was... unreadable.

"What have you done to him?" Puffy said in a louder voice.

Dream's painted smile didn't change, and neither did his body. All they heard was a snort echo from behind the mask.

That single, mocking snort was all Ranboo needed to hear to understand what had gone on inside that prison.



Dream had imagined the reunions with his old friends and allies many times. He wanted them to be teary-eyed, crushing and oh-so wonderful, but this would do just as nicely.

He stared at them each in turn from behind his mask, letting them lay their eyes on his terrifying glory once again. The reaction he got was priceless, at least from the two children. Their guardian was frozen by another emotion entirely, but Dream wasn't going to get into that right then or right now. There would be time to gloat over meaningless grief and heartache later.

He took a step forward. They all took a step back. He stepped again. They stepped back again. Dream grinned, amused by their dance.

"I've done nothing," he said, forcing them backwards down the entryway. "What happened to Sam was his own fault."

"How are you here...?" Ranboo gulped, right before clutching his head. He seemed clearly and utterly in pain, cursed with a static migraine Dream could almost hear.

"Go home, Ender Boy," he chuckled. "We wouldn't want your enderwalk to make you do something you'd regret. Again."

"Shut up!" Tommy suddenly cried out, clutching Ranboo. His eyes were shooting daggers at the warrior but deep down beneath the blades, Dream could smell his fear. "Where's Sam?"

"Exactly where you wanted him to be, I should think," Dream said.

The sunlight momentarily blinded his senses as they finally stepped out of the hall. It was wonderful. Cries and yells of confusion followed his arrival, but that was all. There were no clicks of loaded guns, no swift hiss of blades being drawn, and no creak of bow or crossbow strings being pulled back. Even the previously booming canons had ceased fire as the view rippled through the army.

Dream turned back to Tommy. "I mean, that's what all this was for, right?" He gestured at the scene around them. "To take the Vault and kill Sam?"

The boy stammered something, but didn't reply outright.

Dream went on with a malicious glare. "Or was Sam... not your target?" He continued to walk forwards with longer strides. Everyone else backed away, tripping over their own feet and slipping on the upturned earth. "Maybe it wasn't his head you wanted, but mine instead?" He stretched out his arms. "Well, I'm here now! Why don't you drive a sword through my heart, or an arrow through my skull? That's what you want to do, right?" He stepped closer. "Kill me, Tommy!"

"Get away from him!" Puffy's small figure leapt in front of the children, one of them still clutching his head and tugging at his hair and the other trying so hard to look more capable than he really was.

"Puffy, I didn't expect to see you so soon!" he laughed. "Seems just like yesterday when you came to visit me—"

"How are you here?" she interrupted him. "Where's Sam?"

Dream's light and airy attitude died down into something much more sinister. "I think you know," he hissed, waving the trident in front of her face again.

A small drop of blood that still hadn't dried fell off the point, and landed on the end of Puffy's fleece, staining where it fell. He was so close to her now that he could practically hear her heartbeat, quick and racing like a small, frightened animal. She looked too horrified and shocked to move.

"No follow-up questions?" Dream looked around him for an answer. No one moved, no one spoke. "Right!" He clapped his gloved hands together, the sound muffled but still echoing around the pure and blissful shock of the onlookers. "I'd love to stay here and catch up, but I have things to do."

There seemed to be a period of time where no one moved. Seemed to be, because in fact it was barely the length of a single breath. As soon as Dream's smile graced his face, a different kind of chaos broke out.

The army – the large, strong army with powerful artillery at their fingertips and who could crush an entire kingdom if they wanted to – ran. Every soldier scattered, scrabbling up the beachfront and escaping to the first shelter they could find. The men who had previously been dousing the fires from the Vault's cannonballs let the camp burn, and the canvas tents were soon swallowed in dancing flames. The piers were the next to crumble, weakened by the running crowds and broken by the fires and the relentless canon shots. On the island across the coast, the Vault's defences continue to bubble, although the cannons had stopped firing long ago.

The last three to leave were the three that Dream expected. Tommy with his stubbornness, Puffy with her shock, and poor little Ranboo with his quaking fear of doing anything at all.

Dream tilted his head at them, grinning behind his mask. He wouldn't rush them; they could take all the time they needed.

Eventually, it was the hybrid who made the first move, tugging on the captain's sleeve with a pleading gaze. His lips mumbled her name, but Dream could still clearly see her eyes glued to the trident he held. She wasn't going to move. Neither were any of the others.

So Dream sighed and pushed through their small trio, striding off into the Badlands. He only had to take a few steps before he heard the unmistakable cocking of a gun. He turned around.

Tommy glared at him, his hand wrapped around his wood and silver pistol, shakily pointing the barrel at Dream. The loaded barrel, he could tell. Even though swords and axes were his go-to weapons of choice, he still held enough knowledge about firearms. They all stood still, for a long time.

Too long, in fact, and he got bored. "Tommy, if you're going to shoot me, I suggest you get on with it."

Despite the child's confident and rooted stance, despite the flaming hate in his eyes, and despite his clear protectiveness over the hybrid and the sheep behind him, Dream knew he wouldn't. He didn't have the guts to. Soon after, Tommy's arm dropped,

and he bolted, leaving his two companions defenceless. That didn't matter to Dream, and he continued to walk.

The moorland weather changed as he made his way through the clusters of heather, the sky painting itself with dark grey storm clouds. Threatening, they tried to deter the freed warrior from moving on, urging him to turn back to Pandora's Vault. It was futile. Dream was free, and he intended to stay that way.

Lightning cracked across a dry sky, and the winds had picked up once he stepped across the border and onto the Prime Path. The clouds continued to loom, but it didn't rain. The sky would not cry; it had no reason to. Dream stopped for a moment, taking pride of place in the middle of the road and inhaling the sweet, fresh air of the evening. Dusk was upon the land, a sunset on one story, on an era.

The warrior made sure his mask was on, and journeyed on. It was pathetic how entire armies feared his very presence, and the very implication that he had slain the Warden in a blaze of glory. Now he held the trident that had stabbed Sam as a scepter of power, still soiled by his blood. It was enchanting how a weapon could still strike so much fear into people even out of a battle.

Then again, it wasn't the trident that scared them.

Shutters were bolted shut, the paths were cleared in a frenzy and doors were slammed as the people rushed to hide from the awakened nightmare. Businesses closed as before their set times, and the yells of desperate civilians echoed under windows as they frantically tried to seek shelter.

The setting sun cast orange shadows over the wooden path and the grass around it. The dry storm continued to brew ominously, an omen. An omen that had arrived way, way too late.

Dream let the glimpses of his bare skin soak up the fading light. It was the same warmth as the lava of his old cell, but this warmth was so much more pleasant. He waited for the armed battalions to come rushing at him. He waited for braver warriors to try and drag him away again. They never came.

The cowards never came.

He grinned, and chuckled to himself. Oh, how good it felt to be liberated once more, to be respected, to be feared! He began to whistle a jolly little tune, casually slinging Sam's trident over his shoulder. He took detours through the Greater SMP,

circled back into the Badlands for a bit, and even pondered about travelling to and strolling around Kinoko Kingdom for good measure.

He had all the time in the world, and by the gods he'd make the most of it! It wasn't like anyone was going to stop him now, was it? He had a plan, sure, but it would take a lot of time to think about and prepare, so he could at least allow himself this morsel of relaxation.

He was free, after all.

The Chaos, the War and the Pestilence of Pandora's Vault had been unleashed, and the only one who could keep him restrained – the only hope left – was locked back inside the box. Just as the myths foretold.

Chapter Forty-Seven: A Grief That Can't Be Spoken

Drip! Drip! Drip!

The purple, crying obsidian dripped from the ceiling, pooling between the cracks in the rough, jagged floor. The cell was the same as it always had been: on one side was the dark, endless void; on the other, the burning lava that occasionally spat onto him. The only difference was that the jailer had become the jailed, taking the place of the dangerous, feral creature that had escaped merely... merely...

How long had it been, exactly?

Sam couldn't tell. Time held no more weight to him, and neither did the space he was locked in. All he knew was his aching body that was weaker than it had ever been before, the hard ground he was curled up upon, and the rhythmic dripping of the crying obsidian.

When he had woken up, the first thing he did was reach for his single, puny vial of Strength again. He must have misplaced the cork, as more than half of the vial had trickled out. Now, every drop counted even more. It was lazily grasped in his palm, the glass rendered opaque and dirty by his bloody fingerprints. Despite his body wanting to violently expel the icky potion whenever a small amount was drunk, Sam resisted and made sure to keep it safe. He had to make it last, until...

Until what exactly? Until help arrived? What help?

His instincts were still begging him to fight in any way he could, so he did. The bandages on his arm had been unwound and now were tied around his gaping wounds, attempting to hold them together and improving his chances of surviving. They were already soaked, and rendered useless in only a short space of time.

Sam couldn't do anything but wait. The cannibalism-inflicted sores on his arms from the Egg were allowed to breathe freely, although he didn't pay them any mind. He focused instead on the three— well, two hearts on his arm.

The first of the trio had been wiped completely, lost to Las Nevadas' gambling.

The second one however was still there, broken and damaged, and acting as a reminder of a death. Sam had never understood what dying felt like until he went through it himself. It wasn't as scary as he thought; he felt like he had drifted off into a deep sleep, and awoke in agony. Nothing much. But the tattoo would always remain to haunt him. He wasn't as fazed by it as perhaps he should have been.

And finally, his final life seemed normal at first, until one glimpsed the small, liquid droplets dripping from the tip. They would drop down his arm like raindrops one after the other, and fall into oblivion, never to be seen again. Sam had been staring at the second heart for as long as he could remember, unmoving and literally watching his life drip away. More than half of the heart had been drained, and every drop brought him closer and closer to losing it. Like an hourglass, it was counting down the time he had left.

Again, he wasn't disturbed by it. If anything, he had fallen under its spell, watching the droplets fall in the same pattern. It was linear, repetitive – dare he even say, comforting.

Drip! Drip! Drip!

If given the choice, many people would refuse to know when and where they'd eventually die for the last time. The fear of death was nothing new, and had plagued man and beastkind since the dawn of time. But Sam himself would rather opt for the other answer: he would *want* to know, if only to prepare himself. He would want to know exactly how much time he'd have to gather his thoughts, tie up any loose ends, finish anything that was left unfinished, and make his peace with whoever and whatever he could. That was why his hourglass didn't scare him; he could know the exact moment he'd depart, and he could face it bravely and head-on.

There wasn't much to do on the floor of the dark and damp prison cell – alone and in excruciating pain, with only a feeble vial of magic liquid as company – except think. Think, wish, and reminisce.

But when he tried to focus on anything else at all, anything but his impending, final death, he found it impossible. The reality was too jarring to ignore, and so he wallowed in an absent mindset; unfeeling, unthinking, and unmoving.

That would be his final world.

The warden– no. He wasn't a warden, not any more. Pandora's Vault may have been his prison in more ways than one, but a warden needed a prisoner. The prisoner in question had escaped. He had nothing.

Bad was wrong about so many things, but he was indeed right in one regard: the era of Pandora's Vault was over. If Dream was ever confronted again, Sam knew that it would be for the last time. The only prison awaiting him would be a permanent death, revival knowledge or not. It was clear from not only the forgetting of the revival book itself but also the way Tommy's army fought fiercely to take the Vault that what Dream held was of no importance to anyone anymore.

In fact, it was likely that no one cared in the first place; Dream was only imprisoned for gloating and bragging rights, and the position of power offered over him by not only Sam, but everyone else as well. The chaotic beast was contained in a cage and displayed as a spoil of war, nothing more.

In short, Sam wasn't the almighty Warden of Pandora's Vault anymore; he was a dying man with a good heart and a clear mind, and for that he was grateful. If he couldn't take his final breath surrounded by loved ones' forgiveness, he could at least die knowing that he had pardoned part of himself.

The obsidian continued to trickle: *Drip! Drip! Drip!*

The lava continued to smoulder: *Pop! Pop! Pop!*

His life clock continued to drain: *Tick! Tock! Tick! Tock!*

A voice spoke: "Well, well, well..."

A voice spoke.

Sam looked up, and glimpsed a figure staring down at him. He narrowed his blurry eyes to peer closer. *What?* What was going on? Was it another hallucination, just like Puffy, Ranboo and Tommy had been? Very possibly.

The newcomer was a clear, see-through being with ghostly pale wisps that slipped off him, vanishing into thin air and yet never breaking his shape. He seemed almost translucent, but that could have easily just been Sam's muddled senses at play. Two, dark shapes protruded from either side of his head, curling over sheep-like ears and the dark brown hair that framed his face. A smile was plastered on his face; not as unsettling as Dream's, but not comforting either. He looked amused, as if Sam's death had been a special show put on for his own pleasure. Although their previous interactions had been brief and far apart, Sam would recognize that smirk and that stature anywhere.

He knew who the newcomer was and what he had become, and he knew that his arrival was anything but to help. Sam was too drained to care or react. At this point, nothing could shock him, and he couldn't be let down more than he already had been. Slowly, he gulped down another few drops of Strength, and wiped his dry, cracked lips with the back of his hand. "If you're here to mock me," he growled, raising himself slightly from the cold floor. "I wouldn't."

Schlatt raised an eyebrow at him. "Why? Are you going to fuck me up in limbo when you die?" he chuckled, clearly and successfully provoking him. "Fuck me up or fuck me, I don't really care honestly."

Sam glared at him, trying to ignore the ghost's last sentence as best he could and failing miserably. "Shut up. What makes you think I would?"

"Relax, handsome, I'm just offering. Doesn't mean you have to take it."

"Please leave." Sam tried to stagger to another spot of the cell, his body too unbearably warm now he was moving. He craved the soothing coldness of the floor again.

"Leave?" Schlatt scoffed, indignant. "It was hell to get in here in the first place! Too many walls, and I couldn't even bring my flask."

"Then why did you come? I never asked you to." Sam finally found a spot against the back wall, and leaned against it. The dried blood on his abdomen clung to his skin in clamps, tearing his wound open again. The ram crossed his arms and stood in front of him. "Fucking hell, man! I'm just trying to be nice!"

Sam wasn't going to fall for that lie. When was Schlatt ever naturally doing things to be *nice*? There was something else behind it, and Sam could tell. "What do you want, Schlatt?"

"I want to talk to you."

The man looked around him, then narrowed his eyes. "I'm kind of busy."

"Busy with what? Dying alone?"

Sam fell silent. He had an answer; he had a thousand of them, even, and a few retorts thrown in for good measure. Still, he said nothing; either he was too weak to do so, or he knew Schlatt was right. For once.

"I saw you in Las Nevadas," the ghost continued. "You're Quackity's new business partner, aren't you?"

"You've been hanging around him?"

"Of course I have! Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I can't admire my loved ones anymore, does it?"

Loved ones?

Sam couldn't help but grit his teeth. Quackity had told him a few things during their meetings, and some of those things turned out to be confessions, specifically about the Manberg cabinet. To say Sam had been horrified would be a gross and unworthy statement; he didn't know what to do to help or comfort him, but Big Q had assured him that it was all in the past. Loved ones, indeed...

"Well, then I'm sure you paid Puffy a large number of ghostly visits, right?" The words had slipped out on their own accord, and Sam was glad they did.

Schlatt's face twisted into a snarl. "What's it to you?"

Sam let out a huff, and let another few potion drops run down his throat. "I just thought it would have been an obvious question," he said. "After all, you two had something going on a while back, right?"

"Why? Are you interested in her?"

"I care for her, Schlatt," the man replied, speaking nothing but the truth. "Which is more than I can say for you."

"You're right, I don't. Not anymore." The subject was dropped surprisingly quickly afterwards, and the ram continued. "So, Las Nevadas..."

"I'm not Quackity's business partner any more."

"But you *were*, weren't you?" Schlatt smirked again. "I have something to ask you."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"That revival shit, thing... can't remember what it is exactly. I want it. Quackity couldn't get his hands on it."

Sam bristled at the words. That's why Quackity came to torture Dream. He glared at the ram. "The Revive Book. Why do you need it?"

"Take a good, long look at me," Schlatt muttered, stretching out his arms. "And *please* stare at every single bit..."

The man diverted his eyes immediately, deeply troubled. Quackity knew about the revival powers; why didn't he remind Sam about them? Maybe if he had brought Tommy back sooner, things could have been different— *I'm bargaining again*.

"You're selfish," Sam grumbled.

"You're the one who pushed Tommy through hell, just because you couldn't fucking let go of him."

"And you killed your own son."

"No, no!" Schlatt wagged a disapproving finger in front of his face. "*Technoblade* killed him!"

"Under your orders—"

"That book belonged to me," Schlatt continued, changing the subject *again* to Sam's annoyance. "I want it back."

"Then *fetch*," Sam growled back. "Dream's not here anymore."

"No shit, Sherlock. I think I can fucking see that." The ram sighed. "This is a waste of time..." He walked away from the man, mumbling something about a nice whiskey awaiting him in Las Nevadas, and turned back briefly. "Want some help?"

The offer was jarring and unexpected. Sam blinked in confusion. "I'm... What?"

"Help, you brainless idiot. You want me to get some for you?"

Sam looked down. With only a quarter of the potion left, a gaping wound and no keys – the Vault's having been stolen from his very grasp – it would take a miracle to save him now. With a heavy sigh, he shook his head. "I'll get out of this," he lied.

Schlatt lingered a little longer, his eyes narrowed as he stared him down. Then, he shrugged. "Alright then, suit yourself."

He walked into the nearest wall, and disappeared. *He walked into the wall.* Sam perked up momentarily when he did, a glimmer of hope ignited within him, and then remembered. He sank down again. *Right. Yeah. He's a ghost.*

Sam had often joked about going down with the Vault during its construction; on days where he clearly looked like he needed a rest from the heavy, back-breaking lifting, a few of his friends would try to stop him and make him take a break.

"Oh no, you're only getting me out of this prison in a coffin!" he would chuckle, and get back to work while listening to the exasperated sighs of his peers.

Now, that single joke rang true, or it partially did. Chances are his body was never going to come out of the Vault, dead *or* alive.

With the meticulously crafted defences and carefully chosen, strong materials it was built out of, Pandora's Vault would last another two, maybe three thousand years. Then, when the walls would finally crumble and the redstone machines would sink beneath the waves, the remaining dust of age-old bones would be revealed. The slander against the Warden would have long since dissipated; Sam would go from being hated to being totally and utterly forgotten, interred within the walls of a tomb too grand for what he was in life.

A part of him began to accept that, and he lay back down against the obsidian. He chugged down the rest of the Strength – his arrogant, stubborn streak still determined to fight on – and he settled down for the not-so long wait.

The heart, his life, continued to drain.

Drip! Drip! Drip!



Thwack! Twack! Thwack!

Ranboo's brain had been muddled for quite a long time now, so he just had to follow the noises. They led him through the forest and into a clearing surrounded by knee-high shrubberies and berry bushes. From the skid marks in the earth to the rusting, blunt weapons laid against the trees and overgrown by ivy, Ranboo recognized it as one of the more secluded, private training grounds for warriors.

When Tommy's past friendships with fabled warriors and generals was brought in to question, it wasn't too surprising to figure out how he knew about this place.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Ranboo didn't have the will or the brain power to drag himself home; instead, he had spent the last couple of nights huddled at the bottom of the L'Manberg crater, in the exact same crevice he had escaped to on the dark, dark night before the Ender Pamphlet struck down his reputation. It was rough, it was cold, and the cavern breeze whistled through his long, pointed ears, but he was thankful for the distractions they provided. Distractions that were unfortunately no longer present.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

The hybrid watched from afar as Tommy shot another round of arrows into a tree. The paper target he had nailed to the trunk tore with each missed shot, of which there were many. The fragments drifted down to the ground in crumpled strips. When the quiver was empty, the boy snapped his fingers, and a chocolate brown racoon scampered down from his shoulders and ran across the shooting range. He clambered up the tree, replaced the target with an identical albeit undamaged one and collected the arrows in his jaws. Then, he returned to Tommy, put the arrows back in the quiver, and the cycle repeated.

Sam Nook had definitely seen Ranboo, occasionally shooting him a blue-eyed stare as he scampered back and forth. He didn't make a sound however, thankfully not alerting the boy to the hybrid's presence. Tommy's glaring, narrow eyes and his pursed lips told Ranboo more than enough.

"What do you want?"

Ranboo perked up, concentrating once more on his friend. Ex-friend. He didn't know where they stood anymore, quite honestly. Tommy's gaze wasn't on him, but he knew that his words definitely were. He gulped, still choosing to remain silent, and exchanged a brief glance with the raccoon. The animal made a gesture that the hybrid could read all too well: *Man up, for crying out loud!*

He took a deep breath, attempting to recover his confidence from merely days ago. He looked at the tree and the target upon it. As before, many of the shots were missed, and the red center of the target was untouched. "You need some practice," he chuckled nervously, attempting to lighten the mood.

"What the *fuck* do you want, Ranboo?"

Ranboo faltered, and began to fiddle with his hair. Then, he stopped. No, he shouldn't be so nervous in front of Tommy. Not only was the hybrid much taller than him, but Tommy was still a kid. It wasn't like he was faced with an adult, like Techno or Dream.

Dream.

He shuddered, nervously focusing his attention on the forest around them. The treeline was cloaked in shadows, but thankfully Ranboo didn't see any sign of a smiling face. His head didn't pound relentlessly either, and that seemed to be a telling sign.

"I wanted to see how you're holding up, y'know, after..." He paused, tongue tied. "Everything..."

"I'm angry," Tommy replied sharply, storming over to the tree and collecting his arrows himself with a grumble.

"Angry?"

"I mean, the L'Manberg people have turned soft! It's unbelievable!" He ripped a handful of them out of the trunk, almost crushing them in his fist. "One sign of danger and they run! They couldn't even break into a stinking prison!"

Ranboo was aghast. "I—"

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm the only competent soldier left in this world!" The boy marched back to his firing spot, and loaded his bow again. The wood bent precariously as it was drawn back. "They're either all too cowardly or fucking dead for good!"

"Tommy, you know full well that wasn't what I meant." Ranboo had turned to stone, glaring at Tommy. *There* was his long-lost confidence. It was a pity that it only came out when he was angry, specifically angry at the golden-haired boy.

Tommy shot the bow, missing the target entirely and hitting the bushes behind it. Sam Nook went to retrieve the arrow while the boy prepared to shoot once again. "Enlighten me then, for fuck's sake."

Ranboo sighed. "I'm talking about Sam, Tommy."

"Ding, dong; the warden's dead. So what? What?"

"I expected you to be a little sadder."

"Why should I be? He was a dick!"

"He *loved* you, Tommy," Ranboo muttered. He hesitated, then went on. "And maybe that's the only "dick" move he's ever done!"

The next arrow shot nearly hit him right between his eyes, but he stayed still. Tommy reeled back in a daze, before curling his lip and advancing towards the hybrid. Gods, Ranboo had never seen him so utterly non-threatening before. He straightened his back.

"Fucking prick," Tommy spat Ranboo's way.

The hybrid growled. "Go ahead, keep insulting me. That's all you properly know how to do anyway, isn't it?" Watching the boy struggle to find his words and gape at him was strangely satisfying. "Try and hide the fact that you give two shits about his death and that you're human, Tommy! Aren't masks comforting to wear? You're just like Dream."

"You take that back—" Tommy spluttered, before being unceremoniously cut off.

"Take what back, the truth? I've stayed silent long enough, and the only prick here is *you*!" His throat tightened as he went on with his ramble, a familiar grief starting to overwhelm him yet again. "Now Sam's gone and Dream has escaped, and guess whose fault that is, eh? Guess who let a madman go to reign terror upon us all yet again! Guess

who killed the Warden of Pandora's Vault! Guess who murdered and pushed away all the people he loved—"

"STOP!"

It was as if the entire world fell silent at Tommy's cry. The birds stopped singing, the wind hushed, and the leaves stopped their trembling. Ranboo and Sam Nook froze in their tracks. The hybrid even held his breath, too loud for his own liking.

All that remained was Tommy's heavy breathing as he clamped his hands over his ears. "Stop!" he yelled again. "Please..."

Ranboo could almost feel the sting of Tommy's harsh nails digging into his head, and he softened immediately. Looking back, he scared himself with his behavior and what he said. He tried approaching him, holding out a caring, apologetic hand.

"Tommy...?" The boy didn't reply, and the guilt continued to pile. "I'm so sorry, I went too far—"

"Sam didn't care about me—" Tommy suddenly piped up in a small, hushed voice.

"Tom—"

"— but *I* cared about *him*." He sniffed, then glared at the hybrid. "There, I said it. Are you happy now?"

Ranboo blinked at him in shock. Tommy quickly turned back to his archery, and prepared another shot. The hybrid glimpsed a long, purple and red-rimmed bruise on his inner forearm, raw from where the bow-string had rubbed him. It looked painful, and Tommy winced when he let the arrow go. Nevertheless, Ranboo didn't bring it up.

The shot landed in the middle of the target, although Tommy didn't celebrate. Instead, he knelt down and began to scratch Sam Nook between his ears. The raccoon hugged his arm and the boy picked him up.

There was a hint of a smile, or so Ranboo thought. It certainly wasn't there when Tommy turned to him. "What are you looking at?"

"I..."

"Save it," Tommy muttered, slinging his bow over his shoulder and shoved past him. "You're right, I push everyone I love away."

"Tommy, wait--"

The boy stopped. "What?"

"I'm sorry."

He scoffed. "Thanks, Ranboo." He laughed loudly, but the hybrid could clearly tell it was forced. "*I'm* so sorry I killed Sam! Wow, an apology! Now let's see if he's going to come back. Maybe Dream, if the bastard is listening right now, will be so touched that he'll go and lock himself back up in the Vault! How about that? Let's make everything better by apologizing to one another!"

"That's not what I meant!"

"It's not like you'd remember shit if it wasn't, would you?" Tommy snapped back.

The chocolate brown raccoon in his arms shimmied up the boy's shoulder and curled around his neck like a soft, furry scarf. Ranboo couldn't tell if he was trying to calm Tommy down, or protecting him from a possible, violent outburst from the hybrid. Sam Nook opened a single blue eye, glaring at Ranboo. He took a step back.

"I know you're angry," he said, shaking despite himself. "But none of this is your fault--"

"Make up your fucking mind!" Tommy yelled. "Was it my fault? Wasn't it? Choose already and stop playing on both sides." He held up his hands and started to enact a silly imitation of what the hybrid soon recognized as himself. " 'Oooh, look at me, I'm Ranboo! I've got memory problems, oh no! I don't remember anything, I can't be blamed! Please, I'm so sweet and caring! Trust me, I'm a nice guy who's only playing with Tommy like *a fucking toy!*' "

Against his better judgement, Ranboo pouted. "I don't sound like that," he mumbled, fiddling with his hair again. His long tail wrapped around his leg.

"I hope you fucking freeze to death again."

Ranboo dragged his gaze from the floor. Tommy glared back, his eyes as cold and as blue as ice. Perhaps if he had the chance, he would have frozen the hybrid right there and then himself.

The boy spat at his feet. "Get lost," he swore, and stormed off.

Ranboo felt numb. That was a strange feeling for him, he who was so sensitive and unable to control his emotions.

He sank to his knees in the middle of the clearing, his eyes focused on the target and the arrow planted right in the center. He too had sustained a shot, this one to his heart and piercing right through his soul.

With trembling fingers, he pulled his memory book from his pocket.

Sam is dead. I don't know who to blame anymore, because we're all at fault. I've lost myself again. Tommy hates me. Everyone should hate me, then maybe I'll feel normal again. I don't feel anything. I don't, I don't, I don't, I don't, I—

He stopped writing and dropped his pen, curling up on himself and burying his head into the grass. It was still wet from the morning dew, and it was cold. Too cold. He stayed there.

Ranboo didn't want to go home that day, or the night that followed. He didn't want to worry Technoblade, make Sapnap attempt to lighten his mood with forced jokes, or witness Philza's utter indifference to the whole situation and go about his life normally. Normally. *Normally*. There was nothing normal about the death of a friend. Ex-friend. He didn't know where he stood with Sam anymore, quite honestly.

His steps carried him to the Temple of the Undying, where a young ram he loved so dearly was eagerly awaiting his return. When Ranboo saw him, his stomach tied itself into knots. He awaited the backlash, the sharp words that would cut his self-worth down like knives. He wouldn't blame the ram if that was what came of their first proper interaction in months.

But Tubbo welcomed him back with open arms and a bright smile, yet the mood was still sombre. "If you don't want to talk now, we don't have to."

His tone told the hybrid everything: Tubbo knew. He knew what happened and why the hybrid was in distress. He was kind, and giving him a choice.

Ranboo collapsed into Tubbo's arms, and cried. He sobbed over Sam, he sobbed over his frustration over Tommy, and he sobbed because of Tubbo's unwavering

kindness and affection; a blessing Ranboo would never, ever think he deserved. Not in a million years.



The letters burned.

That was all there was to it. Outside the home, the frozen wind lashed at the windowpanes and whipped through the windmill's sails. Snowflakes tumbled around, drawing spiralling and enchanting patterns in the dark night sky. Inside, the only light was the glow of the fire, crackling pleasantly in the hearth. It spat and shimmered, and the letters continued to burn. Basking in the long, orange-tinted shadows on the wooden floor, the captain watched in complete silence.

It wasn't out of respect. It wasn't out of sadness. It was caused by a full and complete numbness, or so she forced herself to endure.

She knew what a proper heartache felt like, and she was no stranger to grief either. However, she never knew how truly painful it was to experience both at the same time.

Sam was dead.

The truth was violent. At first, apart from the shock, she was calm and composed, and managed to drag herself back to the Temple of The Undying, amassing enough strength to stand in front of Foolish and ask for his services once again.

Only this time, he refused. "You told me bringing back Tubbo was your first and only request. Necromancy is a dark magic to tap into, and messing with it will result in the anger of the spirits, and the other gods that surround us. I can't do any more."

When she had realized that her request was being rejected, she did what she had promised the god that she'd do; she begged avidly at his feet. If it was witnessed, then perhaps it would have been even more humiliating for her than it already was. Yet Foolish still refused and after hours of pleading and bargaining, the captain was told to leave, at the very least until she had calmed down.

Tubbo, Michael and Michelle stayed in the Temple. She didn't have the strength to face them, not immediately. Not then, not that evening, and not that night.

Her next stop took a three-hour journey to get to. Not many knew about the hidden home in the mountains, but she did. It was a safe space Sam told very few about. The captain was a lucky one.

When she arrived, the first thing she saw was an excitable silver blur darting around the grassy ground in front of the hidden door, chasing the butterflies and barking up at the eagles. Sam must have let her out the last time he went back, or she had gotten out herself.

When Fran saw Puffy, she bounded over with a wagging tail and a slimy wet tongue, eagerly weaving between her legs and leaping up to lick her face. The captain would have smiled, if she wasn't there for much more sinister business.

She crouched down to the dog's height, who sat obediently. Her happy expression had since changed, and she lifted her nose to the air. She looked behind the sheep, trying to see where her best friend was. When she didn't see the only man capable of beating her in a wrestling match, she began to whine and looked up at Puffy, inquisitive.

That only brought more sadness down upon her. "I'm so sorry, Fran," the captain whispered as she pulled the dog into her arms. "I'm so sorry..."

She went back to Snowchester, only accompanied by Sam's hound and scarred by tear stained cheeks. No one stopped her as she passed, and no one asked her any questions. "It's about her son," they'd conclude, their sympathy for the grieving mother once more softening their advances. The dog was ignored most of the time, or brushed off as a mere stray trailing her for the promise of food. She said nothing, and continued.

Her home was freezing, but that helped dull the blow, and now here she was; frozen to the bone in front of a roaring fire, left with her thoughts and emotions she tried so hard to push down. Fran pressed against her side, lying down and giving her hand comforting licks now and then.

Puffy had made her fair share of rash decisions in her life, but she was always comforted by the thought that she had no other way out, and she was doing it for the better. Sometimes, she ended up regretting them, but that came much later. She had never been as torn as she was right then, in the moment.

As soon as she had closed her door, she went to light the fire. It wasn't out of comfort, simply necessity: Snowchester could get bitterly cold at night and there were

rumours that some froze to death in their sleep. But as she carried the logs back and forth and lit the first spark, she glimpsed the stack of letters on the high shelf.

She stared at them for a while. Then, she walked over, grabbed them, and tossed them onto the fire without a second glance. Fran barked as she did, distressed that the last scent of her master was tossed aside. In a matter of moments, the papers were ablaze and curling in on themselves, burning into coal-coloured ash that escaped out the chimney in small puffs. The captain watched. She couldn't do anything but watch those precious pieces of paper smoulder and disappear, along with the words of someone she would never hear speak or see write them again.

Puffy didn't know what hurt more; losing Sam himself, or destroying the only things she had left of him.

There was a knock at the door.

Puffy looked up from where she was stoking the hearth, then out of the window. The stars speckled the velvet sky beyond, and midnight would soon be upon the land. Who was knocking at this hour?

She didn't try and hide the fact that she dragged herself to the door. All her strength had been drained by the floods of tears and the anger she took out with her sword on a poor fencepost behind her house. When she opened the door, however, she perked up just a little bit.

"Sam?"

He turned to her and by the gods, he looked like a mess. His green and brown hair was disheveled, his skin was glistening with sweat and the shadows under his eyes were even deeper than when she had last seen him. Instead of his shining golden armour and long green cloak, he wore nothing but the simplest of clothes covered by a greasy, stained apron.

"Puffy," he croaked, his voice unnaturally high and strained compared to his usual, deeper and gentler tone.

The sleeves of his black undershirt were rolled up to his elbows and when the captain touched his exposed skin, she was shocked how frozen he was. What kind of person would run off to the North without any warm clothes?

A grieving madman would, and that's just what was happening.

"Get in," she ordered, tugging him through the threshold and locking it behind her. She turned to him, worried. "Sam? What's going on? Is everything..."

Is everything okay? That was what she wanted to ask, but she stopped herself at the last second. No, everything was not alright – for her, or him, or anyone else who was suffering because of the same, heartbreaking tragedy. She knew that, and it was no use rubbing it in deeper.

Sam staggered a little further into her home, before catching himself on the back of a chair. The muscles on his back tensed and he was shivering, and Puffy had an inkling that it was because of something other than Snowchester's frozen weather. "I'm fine," he mumbled. "I was... I just felt a little lonely and I didn't know who else to go to."

Seeing her close friend turn into a shell of his own self was painful enough, but being told she was the last glimmer of hope he seemed to count on was something else entirely. "Oh, Sam..." She walked up to him and placed a comforting hand on his back, and one wrapped around his forearm. His broad shoulders hunched under her touch, but she could tell he was ever so slightly calmed.

Now she was so close to him, she was hit by an overwhelming smell. She soon recognized it as alcohol, along with something else she couldn't identify at first whiff. It wasn't on his breath; instead, it came from his hands, and the apron he wore. That didn't push her away. Instead, it only made her comfort him further, burying her face into his shoulder. The sickening scent of rose incense crowned everything else, too vibrant and too intense.

"Everything's ready for the funeral tomorrow," he said in a quiet voice. "I... I took care of the last preparations."

The last preparations. Everything suddenly made sense, from the suffocating smells to the darker stains on his apron. "Sam, no..." She turned his head to her, trying to catch the gaze he had focused on the floor. "Please tell me you didn't..."

His reluctance to answer was the only confirmation she needed, and she wordlessly gave him a proper hug.

He didn't even react then, except for a small shift of his head as he buried his face into her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have... It only made things worse."

"Why didn't you ask someone else?" she whispered, tears pricking the corners of her eyes once again.

"I couldn't trust anyone else with his body other than me," he mumbled back, "and even then... I killed him..."

Blaming himself for Tommy's death was hard enough, but taking on the task of embalming him... "You shouldn't have, Sam," Puffy scolded gently.

"He looked so peaceful..." Sam's voice cracked, and she felt him shake. His murmurs turned into muffled sobs, and his large arms wrapped tightly around her. "He looked so peaceful, Puffy! I... I..."

"Sam, none of this is your fault!"

After a while of holding and persuading, Puffy managed to move them from the table to the fireplace, discarding his apron in the process. Now they were huddled up beside the hearth, Puffy sitting in his lap and softly carding her fingers through his hair. He still held tightly on to her, encircling her like a shield. He continued to hide his face in her shoulder; it was almost as if he was refusing to let her see him sob. The captain wasn't going to push him, and only cuddled him gently.

His build was so much bigger than hers, and she felt tiny curled up against him. Was it strange for her to want to protect possibly the most powerful person in the land, with her small size and with only half of the strength he held? Perhaps, but that's exactly what she wanted to do. If she couldn't save him from outside dangers, she could at least save him from himself and from the sea of self-hate that followed him.

She closed her eyes momentarily, falling in sync with Sam's breathing. It was pained and hesitant, punctuated by soft whimpers and sighs as Sam cried against her. His heart was racing, thumping loudly.

The fire spat and roared, basking them in a mellow warmth and orange glow. It was deceptively reassuring and normal, and only reminded the captain of how their lives were far from that now. A melancholic silence had fallen over them both, and they became one with it for a while longer.

Puffy gave Sam a soft kiss on his cheek. He still felt remarkably cold, but he was starting to warm up. That, or the tears trickling down his face were to blame, leaving their searing marks behind.

"No matter what happens, I'll be here for you."

She watched as one of his black and green eyes opened, tired and glistening. "Please don't make promises you can't keep," he mumbled.

"Who said I wasn't going to keep it?"

"I can't stand losing you too one day," he replied.

"Then you won't. I'll be here for you, always." She could feel him start to tremble again, and continued to thread her fingers through his soft green hair. "Come what may." The scent of the roses was overwhelming once again, a constant reminder of the difficult day awaiting them tomorrow.

She waited a while for his reply. When it finally came, it was low and gravelly, a whisper right next to her ear.

"Come what may..."

Puffy opened her eyes. She didn't know how much time had passed since she had fallen asleep, but the fire was already out; merely a few, dull embers smouldered in the grate. The letters and the logs were no more, and her home was bathed in the dark grey shine of the nocturnal sky through the windows. Her legs ached from the hard wooden floor beneath her, and the uncomfortable sensation of pins and needles began to creep up her body. Fran was dozing at her side, but stirred when the captain moved.

Puffy tried to lean back into Sam's touch, only to be met with stiff air and a void. It took her a moment to remember that he wasn't there, and why. Even so, she still felt the pressure of his tight, protective hug around her, or perhaps that was only the sadness striking her down again.

Abruptly, she stood up. With her home still dark and the shadows watching her at every corner, she grabbed her cloak and left. The newly fallen snow crunched under her feet as she made her way down the hill where her house sat, through the twisting cobbled streets of the town below, and out of Snowchester. Fran's broad, wolf-like build pressed against her legs, alert and protective. Puffy paid no heed to the dangers of the Nether, and continued her trek down the Prime Path and past the overgrown crimson plants that wanted her dead.

Their whispers tried to entice her with empty promises and lies, and she shut them out. It was a lot more difficult than usual, however, as the single gift the Egg gleefully implanted into her mind was one that she would have agreed to in a heartbeat.

The street lamps she passed cast golden spotlights on the road, their shine beating with the same intensity of the stars above. Not a sound echoed from the pavement, but Puffy knew that it wasn't because everyone was sleeping. In fact, most homes still had their lights at this time, their doors and windows barricaded shut in a feeble attempt to deter the green demon that now roamed the streets from breaking in.

The captain hadn't even *thought* about Dream since the moment she had laid her eyes on the sharp, bloodied trident he held out. He could be watching her right now, for all she knew. He could be sharpening a blade right now, a sharp edge with her name on it. She didn't care. Let him watch, let him plot, let him smirk and cackle. All her thoughts were occupied by only one task, one thought.

One single memory.

When King Eret had come into power all those years ago, he had done everything to help build up his new kingdom. One of these things was ordering the planting of many plots of wildflowers. Thus, the edges of the Prime Path were brimming with sweet-scented colours that burst out of the ground like fireworks. They bloomed all year around. There were more natural flowers, like daisies and marigolds speckled between patches of lush green clover, and more exotic ones like the snapdragons and tiger lilies that everyone admired so much. It wasn't an offence to pick them, but there was a unanimous respect around the people to not do so.

That night, Puffy couldn't care less, and absent-mindedly began to make a bouquet of whatever she could. It was small, but it was a bigger deal than it was made out to be. Magnificent red carnations and dainty, sky-coloured bluebells surrounded a dark scarlet rose that pricked her hand when she clutched it. An otherworldly force seemed to be guiding her fingers, and what they created was beautiful. So beautiful, and such a waste.

Fran, despite dutifully sticking by Puffy's side was no less of a puppy at heart, and began to stop and sniff at every single new smell, or snap at the fireflies painting a ballet around them.

They continued walking. Over the hills, across the moorland, and only stopping once the big, black box in the ocean came into view. The military camp on the mainland that had been abandoned merely a day ago lay in peaceful slumber, like a scene frozen in time. The charred canvas, the flags and the guns were silent, motionless. Puffy made

her way to the only pier still standing, treading carefully. The dog cautiously followed her every step.

The wood creaked under her weight and a plank or two splintered underfoot, but she kept going. The edge of the pier had since been cleared by the cannonballs fired from the prison overhead. The barricades of scraps and debris had been torn down, the only remnants being loose cobbles and splinters scattered across the deck. The cannons too were still there, completely abandoned and still scented with the gunpowder used to light them.

The captain didn't want to focus on the carnage around her. She didn't want to be reminded why she was doing what she was doing, and she didn't want her mind to wander and accuse culprits that weren't half as evil as they were made out to be.

Her gaze was trained on the slumbering monster in front of her: Pandora's Vault.

There it sat across the waves, just as it always had. The lava that coated the exterior had since set, layering across the island in dark grey folds. The heat still reached her even now, and the thick flow was far from as cool as she expected it to be. Behind the prison, the sea continued to stretch out, the edge of the horizon lightening as early morning began to approach.

She stayed silent, listening carefully for a shout, a cry, anything that could tell her that there was a fleeting chance; a fleeting hope that somewhere in that monster of a build, Sam was still alive. Anything at all.

The waves roared. The lava continued to bubble behind the thin crust on its surface. The shredded tents fluttered in the breeze. The pier's unstable wooden legs groaned. And the Vault remained silent. It remained silent; dead, even.

Dead.

The small bouquet began to weigh tons in her grasp. The soft carnation petals felt rough against her hand, and the rose's thorns had never pricked her so deeply. Her fingers stroked the hanging buds from one of the bluebells, fiddling with one of them until she managed to turn it inside out. It was a small thing, but so exceptionally hard to do in her current mindset. Nevertheless, it didn't tear, and the bunch of flowers was graced with a small, strangely endearing imperfection that made it all the more painful to lay.

Captain Puffy continued to stare up at the prison in all its dark, looming glory. It seemed to melt into the dark night sky above it, circled by the burning stars. It was too peaceful for what it was, for what had just happened.

She hadn't realized that someone had joined her and Fran. There were no footsteps, no reassuring touches, and no direct greeting. She jumped when she heard the popping of a flask cap.

"Fucking hell, this is a sorry sight," a raspy voice all too familiar to her whistled.

Fran snarled and began to bark, her hackles raised. Puffy grit her teeth and kept her head up.

Mourning a loved one was awful enough, but doing it beside someone she hadn't seen in years and hated was a whole other thing altogether.

Chapter Forty-Eight: A History Better Forgotten

"Schlatt," she greeted through gritted teeth.

"Puffy," he echoed.

She still didn't turn to face him, too focused on the prison. Too focused, or perhaps forcing herself to stare at it, if only to try and calm a growing rage within her. Fran continued to growl and snap beside Puffy, and she carded a hand through her thick silver pelt to shush her.

"Fucking hell, get that dog away from me before I punt it into the sea," the ram said.

"I'd like to see you try." Puffy almost caved in to her desire to watch the hound tear the newcomer apart, but refrained from doing so.

It wasn't like Fran could do much damage anymore anyway: Schlatt was dead. He had been dead for a few years now, or so his grave set just outside L'Manberg's borders said. Then why wasn't Puffy shocked by his arrival, and his clear presence beside her? Schlatt was a ghost. He was dead and he had come back as a phantom; big deal, so what? Nothing, that's what, except a vivid hate and the reluctant acceptance that only

the worst beings to ever walk this land would have the privilege of rebirthing as ethereal creatures.

The question of why the ram had never shown his face before to her never even crossed her mind.

"If you're here to mock me in any way, I wouldn't," she said, judging that that was the only reason he'd have for coming to her so late, or rather so early in the morning.

He chuckled. "Funny; I was told the exact same thing a few hours ago."

"By whom?"

"None of your business."

She bristled at his sharp words. Finally, after years and years, she turned and looked at him.

Gods above, he hadn't changed in the slightest. His tall stature, his prim and proper suit that was always creased at that one particular hem and the unkempt nature of his hair were all the same, even down to the way he'd pinch his eyebrows together while drinking. It was remarkable how he managed to simultaneously look like a glorified president and a homeless man.

"You ran off," she reminded him. "You left me and my son alone, so yes; I think you'll find what happened in your life since then *is* my business."

"Sheesh, still fucking angry about that, eh?" Schlatt rolled his eyes, and capped his flask again. It was a little, shining thing, with silver indents and emblazoned with the symbols of Las Nevadas.

Captain Puffy couldn't control herself any longer. "Of course I'm fucking angry!" she yelled, the smirk on his face at her outburst only weakening her self-control. "How could I ever *not* be angry about that?"

"By forgetting it?"

Forget? FORGET?

"You think I can just *forget* the pain you caused us?" she scoffed, her hand balling into a tight fist. If he wasn't dead already, she would thump him. Multiple times.

He shrugged, oblivious to her silent threats. "Why not?"

This was no time to get involved in long ago arguments. Why should she? Why should she waste her breath? She didn't know, but she was doing it anyway. "Why didn't you just sit down and talk to me about all this before you left?" she asked him. "We could have found a compromise!"

He sighed. "I knew you'd react like this if I did."

Puffy bristled. "So, you're a coward?"

"Just sensible. I've always been sensible."

What a joke. "Sure, like abandoning Tubbo. Sounds sensible to me alright."

"You're the one who sent him away."

"Because of you."

"No, no," he tutted, wagging a finger in front of her eyes. "That was your own decision. I had no input in that shit."

She shoved him away, recoiling when her hands touched the sticky, frozen phantom. "You killed him," she spat with a sneer. Beside her, Fran offered her support with another snarl.

Schlatt looked puzzled. "When?"

"Don't pretend you don't remember."

"Oh, right! The festival." The ram turned back to Pandora's Vault, and took another drink. "Yeah, that was a shitty day, glad you weren't there to see it. Fireworks really mess up my complexion." He vainly brushed his hair back, using his silver flask as a mirror.

Tubbo's scars were never something anyone brought up, and for good reason. That didn't mean that everyone forgot what had caused them, or hadn't heard about it.

"You killed a child!" Puffy growled. "*Your* child!"

Schlatt rolled his eyes. "Techno—"

She jabbed an accusatory finger to his chest. Her fingers sank just below the ectoplasmic crust of his transparent figure, moulding around her nails like wet mud. She shivered. "You gave the order and stood by, watching!"

He shrugged. "So did everyone else there, and you don't hate them for it."

That... That was indeed true. She faltered briefly. Schlatt's reluctance to help wasn't a big surprise, neither was Quackity's. Technoblade was peer pressured into carrying out the execution, or so everyone kept saying. She couldn't hate him for trying to keep his Pogtopian friends alive, although a small part of her would always resent his slight lack of intelligence that could have dragged him out of the situation, and Tubbo too.

But everyone else on the scene?

Fundy, Nikki, Bad, Antfrost, and even the rest of L'Manberg. People that knew what was happening was wrong, and yet still let Schlatt go through with his own son's murder. How could they? Were they all as spineless and cruel as the dictator himself?

Her bitterness melted into tenderness as she realized that Sam was very likely part of that fateful gathering. If she really blamed him or anyone else for Tubbo's death, then she wouldn't be mourning his loss in the way she was. In fact, if they were all really as villainous as a mother's love made them out to be, then she wouldn't have risked her life multiple times to save them or help them. She wouldn't have called them her friends, and they certainly wouldn't have been alive today.

At heart, everyone was just scared. For themselves, and for others. Faulting good people for lacking courage was disgraceful, and shallow.

The captain took a breath. "Because they're good people, Schlatt. Nothing like you."

"Oh, I know you considered me a good person once too, honey. When did your standards change?"

Puffy said nothing, pensive.

"If you say it was when you met that little shit Tommy, I will throw myself off this pier and into the ocean," Schlatt grumbled.

She scoffed audibly. "Please do."

"Harsh."

Captain Puffy found her confidence again. "I met people I love, alright?" That was all he needed to know.

Schlatt, however, seemed to crave the details. "What, like that Nikki girl?"

Puffy tensed up as the name was spoken, and she stayed quiet. There was no use making anything worse, especially for her. That loss had been mourned a long time ago.

The ram continued. He tutted. "Disgrace to Manberg she was, honestly. Or those other weirdos... that bitchy little child, the loopy enderman who's living with my son and the warden guy, right?"

"You're very observant..." How long had he been spying on her without her knowing? She shuddered.

"You dropped your flowers."

"Oh."

The flowers. Right. The flowers.

Remembering why exactly she was where she was, she let the grief string up her heart again, and bent down. The bouquet was a little worse for wear, stems bent and broken and ripped petals fluttering off into the ocean breeze. She tried to spruce it up a little with her hands, then lay it on top of the barricade, slotting it securely between the remaining debris. She felt Fran press against her side, and she buried her face into the hound's silver fur. Her eyes stayed glued to the blood-coloured rose in the center of the bunch, still intact. She wondered if it was going to be ripped away too, just like everything else had been so far.

"Why the long face?" Schlatt chuckled darkly. "Did someone snuff it?"

Puffy's gaze hardened, as did her tone. "None of your business."

"Oh wait, it's for the warden, isn't it?"

She turned to him, startled. "How did—"

He waved his hand dismissively. "All-out, international wars are big deals, Puffy."

Of course. There was no way that Schlatt hadn't heard of the failed storming of Pandora's Vault, although perhaps qualifying it as an "all-out, international war" was a

little too hyperbolic. That is... unless there was more to the preparation that first met the eye.

Tommy, what the heck did you do?

"Hate to break it to you, but people usually give flowers in person."

She snapped back to reality, and looked back at the flowers. So delicate, so sickly sweet. So painful. "Sometimes, it's hard," she pushed out in a small voice.

"Like when they're dead. I get it." Schlatt paused. "By the way, I'm a ghost. Just thought I'd remind you to express your delayed reaction. Boo."

"I noticed, and I don't care. You mean nothing to me." The words had never sounded so true and so relaxing. She breathed a sigh of relief.

For some reason, however, Schlatt got angry, or rather as angry as a phantom could get. "Puffy, I gave you the best thing in your fucking life, like hell you'll forget me!"

"Tubbo is nothing like you. He is a million times better in every way."

"Oh boo-hoo, I'm getting replaced by a lamb, how sad. Spice up your insults a little, geez. I expected better from a sailor."

The captain's fury returned once more. "And I expected more diplomacy from an experienced politician."

"Experienced?" He laughed heartily. "You flatter me, really. Thanks for the compliment."

It wasn't a compliment, merely an observation. But if Schlatt's vanity and ego took it nicely, so be it. There were more important things to fight about. "I'm just saying what's true. You managed to get yourself elected president, even if you screwed it up afterwards."

He hummed in agreement, then smirked. "Well, this is a nice conversation, isn't it?"

"No it isn't."

He clicked his tongue. "Tough crowd."

Puffy finally got to the main point. "What are you even doing here?"

Once again, he shrugged without a care in the world. "Wandering, mostly, and then I saw you and thought I'd catch up a little."

She sighed, frustrated. "And we're back at the beginning again; you're the one who left—"

"You and Tubbo, yeah, I know. No need to keep drilling that in." He paused, then muffled his next words by pressing the rim of his flask to his mouth. "How is the kid?"

"What? Why?" She was honestly taken aback.

"I'm his father, I think I'm allowed to know about my own son's life."

Since when did Schlatt care in the first place? Everything he had said to her so far showed a complete disregard for Tubbo's safety, his well-being, and even the love Schlatt should have given him as a father. He just didn't care, and he had made that abundantly clear. So why now?

And why was Captain Puffy inclined to answer him? "Well, he's... alright. He's happy, and that's what matters."

Was that—

Did—

Was that a flash of softness that crossed the phantom's gaze? Remorse, even? Was there a slight hint of the ram she had first fallen in love with, all those years ago?

"Yeah, I guess." He turned away before she could analyze his reaction any further. Schlatt stared back up at Pandora's Vault and let out a loud exhale. "Fucking hell, this is depressing."

Puffy sighed as well, the heaviness dragging her down once more. "It is..."

"Anyway," Schlatt cleared his throat and took another swig of his flask. "This warden of yours; you like him?"

Painful and happy memories rushed back to her, and she shifted. "It's hard not to," she replied, a soft warmth trickling through her and sheltering her from the frozen wind.

"So if he asked to bone you, you wouldn't be adverse to it, eh?"

Puffy froze and spun around to face him, praying that the ram did not just insinuate what she thought he had. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Do I really need to spell it out for you?"

"No, I just— I don't know what you mean..."

"Fucking hell, Puffy, I'm asking you if you love him!"

Do you love him?

A moment passed, long and dragged out.

"I love all my friends," Puffy finally answered, and that was all she was going to say on the matter, especially to someone like Schlatt.

There was a silence before the ram spoke again. "That's what they all say..." He turned back to the Vault. "You think he's dead in there, then?"

"I... Well, realistically—"

"Reality is shit, I'm asking *you*."

Again, Puffy faltered and tried to divert her thoughts to the fact that Schlatt was essentially acting as her therapist. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the realization, but he was right, strangely enough; what did *Puffy* think?

It would have taken her hours to formulate a coherent response, but she could sense Schlatt's impatience. "I don't think so," she tentatively began. "I mean, I would have felt it in me, right? I feel like my mourning has been too light, for the first time in years. But if he is alive in there, it can't be for much longer. We had a fight the last time I saw him, and we were both in the wrong. I never forgave him, and he never forgave me. It's painful to know that you can never say sorry to them again when they... they..." She trailed off. "It's important to tie up loose ends. So yes, I hope he's alive."

"Jackpot."

"What?" She turned to him again, and found him staring her down.

"Bingo, eureka, you cracked the fucking code," he scoffed with a cocked eyebrow and a sinister grin.

"I don't—"

"He's still alive, Puffy."

"W... What...?" Everything crashed and burned; every tear, every crumb of remorse, every drop of guilt, and her understanding as a whole. She searched Schlatt's face for the glint of maliciousness, the joking streak, and whichever evil part of him would ever think of playing such a joke on her.

However, for the first time, she was met with something else, a stark contrast to what she expected to see but still as shocking: honesty.

Schlatt shrugged. "Yeah, I talked to him. If you want to be forgiven, then there's a good chance he will. He seems so attached to you, it's fucking pathetic."

Sam, pathetic?

Puffy ignored his comment, and panned from the ram back to the walls of Pandora's Vault once more. Still dark and foreboding, they somehow seemed brighter, lit up with something other than the fading moonlight. She waited a while longer in complete silence, trying to pick out a detail; anything that could tell her once and for all that the warden was alive in the belly of the beast he built. Anything at all. Only the roaring of the waves reached her ears, but that was enough for her. She still didn't know what to think of what she had just learned, but a spark of hope had reignited and by the gods! – it had never felt so good.

"Sam's alive..." she whispered to herself.

"That's what I just said."

"He's... he's alive..."

She clutched her chest. Her heart beat at many miles an hour.

"Gods above, woman, are you deaf?"

She glared at Schlatt, but couldn't stay mad for too long. He actually told her the truth, for once. *He told her the truth.* Her attitude fell a moment later. The truth didn't matter if she couldn't do anything about it. She averted her gaze.

A mass of metal was suddenly thrown at her feet, hitting her boot. She looked down, and blinked. She stared. Fran cantered over and sniffed the object, curious. She

began to bark, her tail wagging uncontrollably. A ring of dark grey keys glinted back up at the captain, laced with a slimy strand of green seaweed.

"That motherfucker Dream guy tossed them into the ocean," the ram next to her mumbled through another swig. "I almost disintegrated diving down and trying to get them back, so you better be fucking grateful."

Shocked into silence, Puffy reached down and grasped them in her trembling fingers. "Fucking grateful" she was indeed, although she simply still didn't understand why Schlatt had done this. That was very unlike him. She awaited an answer.

The ram must have sensed her look, as he shifted uncomfortably, thus proving to her that it was indeed an extremely out-of-character way to act for him. He shrugged. "Y'know, if I can't be around for our kid, I know someone else will be."

His reason – considering that Schlatt was the one talking – was ludicrous, so ludicrous in fact that the captain had no idea if he was telling the complete truth or not.

He cast her a sideways glance. "If you hurry and go in with proper preparation, you might have a chance of saving him. If you want to, that is."

"Yes!" Gods, the whole situation almost brought tears to her eyes! "Thank you, thank you!"

She didn't care if she looked weak and pathetic, as the ram would say. She was too excited, too exhilarated to care. She waited for Schlatt to say something more, perhaps another sentence that would betray a softer nature he kept hidden. Instead, he scoffed loudly and rolled his eyes.

"Fucking hell, it's no big deal. Just get on with it."

Neither did Puffy, quite honestly; that chapter of her life had come to a harsh close, and she was all the more happy for it. She turned away and began to rush back down the pier, the keys jingling in her grasp as she grasped them against her chest. The keys were the ones to someone's life now, she'd rather die than lose them.

"Hey, Puffy!"

She turned back briefly. Schlatt was grinning at her, one hand shoved into the pocket of his crumpled suit, his tie undone. His messy brown hair was slicked back

against his scalp and his red eyes burned through her. The silver flask glinted in his free hand, a constant and reassuring reminder of his demise.

"Take a fucking good final look, won't you?" he cackled lightly. "I don't think we'll ever meet again after this."

Suddenly feeling cocky, she smirked back. "I count our parting as an absolute win."

Without even waiting for a reply or seeing the glorious, glorious reaction undoubtedly painted across the ram's face, she turned her heels and ran.

She didn't run home, but instead rushed to Eret's castle with Fran bounding at her side. There, using her status as a trusted friend of the king, she managed to snag a few sheets of paper, a bit of ink and two minutes in the library, where she wrote two letters as fast and as concisely as she could.

All the while, the keys weighed heavily, waiting patiently for their moment to shine, their moment to open up Pandora's Vault for the last time.

As her pen danced across the paper, her mind was only consumed by one thought.

He's alive, he's alive!

Sam was alive!



Fundy had pulled an all-nighter, once again, although this time it wasn't because of a chronic depression overwhelming his life. Recently, his sleepless nights were taken up by something much more relaxing than crying until he threw up: productivity.

His underground workshop was a familiar sight; a humid den filled to the brim with scraps of machines and redstone contraptions he designed himself. He never had the chance to go ahead and study in the Grand Masters' circles as some others had, and he never had the honour of being taught inside the Badlands with the other engineers either. His father was much more keen on him learning about music and the arts, or not keen at taking care of him at all.

He picked it all up as he went, or rather stole as he went. That was alright though; he was never caught, and no one questioned where some of the smaller inventions went, simply shrugging it off and thinking they were blown up by a creeper or were taken into a workshop to fix.

The cunning fox knew what he was doing, and had been self-teaching himself for years now. He was definitely not on the level of designing inescapable prisons or high-security bunkers, but he knew how to get around certain machines, using the backdoors and minute flaws in the systems to get inside.

Fundy had been tinkering until early, early morning, then had clambered back up his ladder, put the trapdoor and rug back in place, and was busy making himself a glass of sweet-berry juice as the sun's pastel rays filtered through the cracks of his shutters.

He rolled back his shoulders and scratched a patch of copper fur behind his ears. He smiled. He actually smiled genuinely. He had his entire day planned out, for once.

After breakfast, he'd take a stroll around the Greater SMP and see if anyone needed help with anything, building or otherwise. Then, he'd come back home and write his official resignation to Las Nevadas, then go and make the long journey to deliver it in person. That sounded like a good plan, and a brave one too.

He had no idea what it was that Puffy said exactly that changed his entire mindset, but it certainly worked. Fundy had never felt so healthy and happy.

There was a knock at his door, jolting him out of his daydream. He almost dropped his juice. After setting it safely on the table, he went to investigate.

No one was there when he stepped outside, and he frowned ever so slightly. "Bloody kids playing pranks..."

He turned to leave when his bare foot hit something on his doormat. Curious, he picked it up and looked it over. A letter. He hadn't received any post since November 16th, and when he did, it was often Tommy and Tubbo pranking him with official-looking documents about repossessing his cutlery or a fictional man by the name of Mr Bakerson wanting to inquire about his car's extended warranty, whatever that meant.

Gods above, if today's pranksters pulled one more "your mother was a salmon" joke out of their asses, Fundy would take the greatest of pleasures to sniff them out, clamp his fuzzy paws around their little necks and wring them out like dish towels.

But when he unfolded the piece of paper, he was hit with something much more surprising.

Fundy,

I wouldn't ask you to help me unless there was any other way, but I'm desperate. Sam's alive. He's alive inside the prison, and I need to get in. Your redstone skills are crucial for this plan to work.

Meet me beside Pandora's Vault's entryway at dawn. You're my last hope.

—Cpt. Puffy

Chapter Forty-Nine: The Break-In

"You're... You're not mad?"

"No, why would I be?"

Ranboo blinked at Tubbo, trying to understand. Was this really his friend speaking? Was something using his body as a vessel, and lying to Ranboo was the first, insignificant step towards world domination? Maybe it was the desert sun muddling his mind, or his nervous attitude twisting his thoughts? There was no way Tubbo was alright with what he had done, and the fact that he had lied and betrayed him! There was no way!

"Why *wouldn't* you be angry?" the hybrid probed, desperate for an answer he could understand. "I betrayed you! I betrayed everyone!"

"Eh," Tubbo shrugged, swinging little Michael onto his shoulders. "I've done worse."

Ranboo knew for a fact that was not true in the slightest. Exiling a best friend was nothing compared to having a role in his murder. He guiltily drew his gaze to the floor and was met by excited little trotters stretched up towards him followed by a bright, toothy smile.

"Pleeease!" Michelle whined, and the hybrid knew exactly what she wanted.

He grabbed her waist. "Alright, we go on three," he told her. "One, two—"

"Three!" she squealed as she was hauled up into the air and draped around Ranboo's shoulders. He made sure she was stable and settled, briefly lingering before walking again. Craning his neck, he watched as she looked down at Michael, rejoicing in her much, much higher vantage point.

Michael grunted and began to pull at Tubbo's horns. "Grow up already, shortie!" he ordered, making the boy laugh.

"Who are you calling short?" he asked, ticking the piglin's little feet and drawing a series of breathless, happy screams.

Ranboo watched them with a smile, his heart slowly sewing itself back together after so long. Every stitch was seemingly falling back into place. Well, almost every stitch. Tommy's was hanging loosely and Sam's was... Sam's was.... He felt like his small loop was gone completely, and a familiar lump rose up his throat. Without that bit of thread, his heart was close to falling apart again. He tried not to think about it, although it hurt. His brain surely didn't cooperate with him, not that it ever had.

"There's that smile," Tubbo suddenly said, ripping Ranboo away from his grief. His close friend was even closer, staring up at him with a grin. "I knew it was there somewhere!"

"Y... Yeah, I guess it was." He was about to reach up and tug at his hair, only to realize that Michelle was already doing that for him. "You're always right, Tubbster."

The boy puffed out his chest. "I know I am," he smirked, and they went on their way.

They had been wandering around the temple for hours now, and yet hallways still insisted on presenting themselves at every given opportunity. It was ridiculous, quite honestly.

The Temple of The Undying?

No, the Temple of The Never Ending Hallways And Lovely Hieroglyphics,
Congratulations To The Artists And Their Incredible Patience On Those.

But Tubbo seemed to be enjoying their long walk, and so did the little piglins, so Ranboo would enjoy it too.

"If anything, you should be the one furious with me!"

Ranboo looked down at Tubbo, and tilted his head curiously. He should be mad at Tubbo? How could anyone ever get mad at Tubbo? "Why?" he questioned.

Tubbo looked away, and the tenseness in his stride told Ranboo that he was a little nervous. He placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, gently pushing him to continue.

"Because of a lot of things," he finally mumbled. "Well, there was me kicking you out of the house, for one thing and calling you crazy. Then, there was me not believing you when you said Tommy had come back." Before Ranboo could say anything about that, Tubbo jumped in. "I know now that's true; I talked to Foolish about all this phantom stuff."

"I'm not angry at you for anything," Ranboo said, weaving his long fingers through the boy's messy brown hair. "You were scared, I was scared too, and we're kids. We fight, we make up, and that's our life."

"Hold on," Tubbo chuckled lightly, shaking the hybrid's hand out of his hair. "There's more!"

"Oh?" Was there? Gods, did Ranboo really forget to write down *that* many important things?

"Who I am."

"Who you are? What do you mean?"

"I mean, hello? I'm a bloodthirsty dictator's son! That's not nothing!" The comment was seemingly meant to be light-hearted, but the strain in Tubbo's voice said otherwise.

The hybrid frowned. "Why would I hate you for that?"

Visibly taken aback, Tubbo hesitated, then shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I guess parentage just defines you."

Ranboo knew that was false. That, or his esteem for his unknown birth parents would go down significantly. "In that case," he replied. "I still love you."

"Huh?"

Puffy's your mom, right?" He turned to him, suddenly unsure. "Right?"

He hoped she was, or a good stack of his shock was made up of misunderstandings and lies.

"I mean, yeah, she is."

"I love Puffy, so I love you. Schlatt's involvement isn't going to change any of that, not that I even met the guy."

"Thank goodness you didn't," Tubbo said, shivering. "He was a nasty piece of work..."

"How long have you known?"

"Not long, but it's strange. I'm not as weirded out as I should be." His demeanour changed, and chatty little Tubbo was back again. "I mean, Puffy and the guy who used to scratch his balls in public? Ew, gross beyond belief. I have no idea what she ever saw in him, but thank the gods they're over. She deserves better."

"I agree." Ranboo nodded. "After everything, she deserves so much more."

"I mean, I do resent her just a little bit for not telling me sooner and the whole giving-me-up-when-I-was-a-baby fiasco, but I'm just glad I finally know. Then again, if she didn't, I would have never met Tommy, or Wilbur, or—" He faltered, and Ranboo could hear the name on the tip of his tongue.

"Philza," he finished for him.

"Yeah, him." Tubbo's tone was flat.

Ranboo could never tell if his friend's avoidance of talking about Phil was due to the horror of Wilbur's death, the guilt about his house arrest in L'Manberg, his Doomsday betrayal or something else entirely. They'd never linger on the conversation long enough for him to find out.

"So yeah, anyways, my mother." A smile graced Tubbo's face once more. "I mean, I'm almost an adult now, but her arrival is better late than never!" He turned to Ranboo. "What about you, do you ever wish your parents would come and see you?"

The question had never come up before, and the hybrid took the opportunity to think for a moment. "Not really. I don't even remember them, so... yeah. I'm good."

He never met his parents, and he didn't remember his life before accidentally stumbling over L'Manberg borders and being greeted by a bright, bubbly girl called Nikki. In all honesty, he liked his life here, and nothing else mattered. Why cry over something he didn't even recall?

"Damn, that's sad," Tubbo commented.

"I guess." Ranboo shrugged.

"I wonder what they would have thought of this."

"Of what?"

"Just... all this. Everything that happened here, what you became, y'know?" He flung his arms out, gesturing at nothing, at everything. "This."

This.

My life.

"I think they'd be disappointed," Ranboo replied, playing along and trying to vividly picture a family he'd never met.

"What? Really?"

"I mean, of course they would be." There was no need to go into detail about why, of course.

"You were a trusted L'Manberg advisor back in the day, and are now a great friend and training with the most powerful warrior the world has ever known." Tubbo shrugged. "I wouldn't call that a disappointment."

Being in touching distance of a powerful position and having ties with a legend was anyone's dream. Anyone would kill for the same chance the hybrid had been given. The only difference was that it was never Ranboo's dream in the first place, rather a random situation he was dropped into. He had to live with it. However, he would be an even bigger fool if he didn't admit that he was fine with it. More than fine, in fact.

"I guess you're right," he resigned, a forced grin on his face that soon became genuine.

He was doing... alright for himself. Not great, but not terrible either. Maybe he should finally appreciate that.

Then again, how could he when Sam—

"You're sad again," Tubbo said to him.

Ranboo quickly wiped the corners of his eyes. "I know," he mumbled, focusing his thoughts on Michelle's little hands wrapped around his hair as if she was holding a horse's reins. "I know."

And there was nothing he could do about it.

They continued walking through the temple, occasionally picking up the pace into a gallop when the little piglins demanded it. With all the adorned rooms filled with shining pictures and jewels, Ranboo's grief was dulled by a natural admiration for anything small, and anything shiny. For that, he was thankful.

"Ranboo."

A booming voice stopped him in his tracks. Foolish had quite literally materialized at the end of one of the corridors, his golden skin shining in the light of the oil lamps. The hybrid would have knelt down respectfully if Michelle wasn't an extra, precious little weight on his shoulders. He resorted to bowing his head.

The god strode toward him. "A hawk dropped this off. I think it's for you." Foolish held out a piece of parchment.

Before Ranboo could respectfully take it, Tubbo sprung up on his powerful little sheep legs and snatched the note out of the god's grasp. Michael swayed on his shoulders, whooping in delight.

"Let me see!" Tubbo unfolded the paper and stared for a moment or two. "Hum..." He sheepishly held it back to Ranboo. "Can you read it, please?"

"Dyslexia, I get it." Ranboo took the letter and began to read it himself.

The first sentence alone was jarring, and he blinked a couple of times before reading on. Whoever had written this must have been high on something; that's how absurd everything sounded. A drop of boiling rage coursed through his veins, a part of him wanting to chew out whoever thought it would be a good joke to taunt him with the warden's death. He glanced at the signature.

–Cpt. Puffy

Oh.

"Well, what does it say?"

Ranboo looked back down to Tubbo. "I need to go." He gently pried Michelle from her perch on his shoulders, and plopped her down beside his friend. "Look after the kids."

Tubbo smirked. "So, that's why my life has been reduced to, eh? Demoted after years of loyal service, from president to babysitter." He sighed dramatically.

"I know, I know," Ranboo couldn't help but chuckle at Tubbo's reaction. Nevertheless, he had to agree that Tubbo had been doing a lot of nothing recently. "I'm sure you'll have a bigger part to play at some point."

"Until then, I will be the best double dad you've ever seen," the young ram replied, eagerly ruffling both piglins' little heads. "Just don't die, alright? I can only be responsible for a short time."

"I can watch over them if you'd like," Foolish said suddenly, his booming voice startling Ranboo and reminding him that the god was there. "Ranboo, a horse is ready for you at the entrance."

"Thank you, Oh Mighty One." The hybrid clumsily bowed down so low his nose almost touched the floor.

"Grovel pitifully at my feet one more time and I'll smite you," the god laughed loudly. "I hate it when everyone does that."

With a gulp and a whimper, Ranboo scrambled to his feet and dashed off to the courtyard. Once there, he mounted the horse Foolish had graciously lent him, and a second later, he was off.

His bottom was sore after two days or so of nothing but riding, and he had a sneaking suspicion that his legs would be perpetually bowed for years to come. Not only that, but his memory problems might have also been susceptible to worsening, if the seemingly regular concussions from being repeatedly thrown from multiple steeds continued.

However, he was pleasantly surprised. No matter how hard he pushed the horse, no matter how fast he made them gallop through the unrelenting, rocky terrain of the Nether, they behaved themselves, and never even tossed their head once. Perhaps they were just biding their time, plotting. Waiting for the right moment to throw off the poor under-sod on their rump.

Horses were maniacal and scheming when they wanted to be.

The journey back to Pandora's Vault was quickly done, and Ranboo soon saw two figures in the distance. The first was one he hadn't seen in a long time; the copper, slouching silhouette belonging to Fundy. The second figure he had been expecting to see broken, with her soul snapped as violently as a dry twig, or a neck thrust over the edge of a cliff-face. And yet, Captain Puffy was pacing back and forth beside a silver-pelted dog looking more preoccupied than grieving, a dark uniform cloaking her figure likening her to a confident, determined shadow with something on her mind.

Ranboo knew what that "something" was, and his first sentence to her was nothing short of blunt. "Puffy, you're not well."

She stopped pacing and stared. "What?"

"That's what I said too," Fundy interjected, sharing a nervous glance with the newcomer.

The captain looked from one to the other, then crossed her arms with a thundering glare. "You both clearly didn't read my letters," she huffed.

"We did," Ranboo protested.

"Multiple times," Fundy added.

"Doesn't sound like it." She tapped her foot.

"I did, Puffy," Ranboo told her, his tone as gentle and as calming as he could make it out to be while terrified of slipping up and saying the wrong thing. "But we're just worried about you! Sam is-"

"Sam is *alive*, Ranboo," she snapped back. "He's alive."

"How do you know that?" the hybrid asked, the sadness welling up inside him once more. "How do you know?"

With a look that Puffy gave him – a look that could only belong to someone so furiously determined, to someone ready to fight tooth and nail for what they wanted – Ranboo shut up.

"I just know," Puffy replied, her simple and vague answer begging for the mercy of no further questions.

The hybrid offered clemency. "Alright." He shared a look with his two companions. "Alright." He turned his gaze to the lava-cast prison, its power still very much making him weak at the knees. He gulped. "Alright... But if he's alive in there, it can't be for much longer."

"And that's why we're going to go and get him."

Ranboo stared at her, dumbfounded. He finally noticed the ring of dark keys hanging from her grasp. He had no idea how she had gotten hold of them - had Sam been trusting enough to give her a set? - but he felt that the question would be dodged. "Going to get him? I-"

"Ranboo, Sam's still in there, and I'm not going to give up on him. But I need to know that I have your support." She turned to Fundy. "From both of you."

"Why us?"

"Fundy has the redstone knowledge, in case we need it."

The fox in question perked up. "I do?"

Puffy shot him a look. "Fundy, you're a brave fox but a terrible thief. Even a blind bat could see exactly what you're doing with those unsupervised machines."

"Fair enough," he mumbled, and Ranboo could almost see him flush with embarrassment underneath his copper fur.

"But why me?" the hybrid probed. "Why am I here? I'm no good with redstone and I'm—" *A danger*, he wanted to say, but the words never left his mouth.

"I need you because you're a friend, and I trust you. In case... in case I'm wrong, I need you there."

In case she was wrong. A lot was at stake here, but he was trusted. He was trusted again.

Ignoring the prideful glimmer that burst through his shy walls, Ranboo nodded. "I trust you too."

"And so do I," Fundy said, a hand on his heart.

Trust; perhaps the only thing that *could* bring these three to work together seamlessly. Two L'Manbergian traitors and one wanted Eggpire traitor. What a nice trio.

For the second time in a short space of time, Ranboo and Puffy made their way to the prison's entrance, Fundy and Fran trailing behind them instead of Tommy. That was another question begging to be answered: what would they do about Tommy when they did or didn't save Sam? Would they keep everything under wraps? Would they tell him?

For now, the answer would have to be put off. The portal rose up in front of them, silent and sturdy. Ranboo approached the lock in the wall, defined by a small, dark ridge in the quartz. He dragged his fingers over it and felt the jagged nub that was jutting out. His heart sank, and he turned to Puffy.

"It's jammed," he told her, although from the way she brandished the end of a snapped key on the ring, she already knew that. "What do we do now?"

Turning back appeared to be the only viable option, but the decision was ultimately made by the most unlikely of his companions.

"There's a piston door here."

Fundy was crouched in the far corner, dragging his fingers up the dark shadow where the walls met. He continued along the sides, scraping his claws along in linear patterns. Ranboo didn't know what he was doing, until he saw flakes of white scatter across the floor and the edge of the doorframe draw itself under his fingertips. The fox reached into his pocket and drew out a pocket knife. He then pressed the blade into the outline and carved it deeper. It took only a few flicks of his knife, until Ranboo could finally and truly see the supposed threshold.

"I think this leads to the portal's mechanics," Fundy told them.

"Is there any way to get in?" Ranboo asked him, starting to feel ever so slightly more hopeful.

"Of course there's a way. The real question is if I can actually find it."

"And can you?" Puffy jumped in, visibly sharing the same hope as the hybrid.

Fundy gave them both a big, toothy grin. "I never said that question didn't have an answer," he chuckled. "And the answer is a yes."

He stuck the blade in between one of the ridges and stood up. With his body pressed against the wall and blocking their view, Ranboo and Puffy couldn't see what he was doing. The fox's body jumped as he made a swift, sharp movement. A loud groan followed, and a thick quartz panel swung back, hitting the wall with a bang. Fundy removed his knife, now a little blunter than it should have been.

He turned back to the two others, shrugging. "No matter how strong piston doors seem, they've all got the same flaw. It's easy once you know how to break in."

Ranboo stared at him with wide eyes, searching for the cowardly little fox he had known in L'Manberg. Instead, all he saw was someone with clearly so much more value to their expedition than he could ever be, and with a laid-back intelligence that the hybrid could only fathom of possessing himself. Maybe he did, and he just didn't remember, or maybe he was smarter in different subjects than some. Fundy was redstone, and he was... literature, maybe? Writing? Well, the Ender Pamphlet wasn't what he'd exactly consider as peak journalism, but he could still improve on that aspect, couldn't he?

Although he definitely knew it wasn't the time, he had an impulse to ask Fundy for advice, but the fox had disappeared, leaving only a gaping piston door in his wake. Something shuffled behind the portal wall, scampering around like a stealthy little rodent. The footsteps and the scratching stopped. Metal began to move around, scraped and scratched, pushed and pulled, hooked and unhooked. The fiddling continued for a while, until something clicked.

The obsidian portal frame was swallowed up in a blaze of purple glory, hissing and spitting like hellish fiends. Ranboo instinctively grabbed Puffy's arm, cowering. He had never seen a Nether portal being lit before; they just seemed to appear one day all over the realms, and he never questioned their presence. Now he'd never look at them the same way again.

"Fundy! You did it!" Captain Puffy cried out above the hollow echoes of the portal. With a hopeful smile smeared across her face, she raised her tricorn from her head in triumph.

Ranboo simply stared at her. Something had softened in the air, and it was undoubtedly due to Puffy's joyous state that he hadn't seen in a long time. Fran began to yap along with the sheep, ending with a victorious howl.

Fundy emerged from the gaping darkness soon after, eyes wide and fingers greasy. "I did?" He noticed the portal, and gasped. "I did it! I actually... I..." He held his head, his mind undoubtedly whirring. "I hacked the machines made by a Grand Master! I'm a genius!" He grinned, and laughed breathlessly.

Ranboo was smiling too and just about to join in, until he noticed Puffy approach the purple plasma. She stuck her hand in it, and the hybrid noticed her changed expression; the confidence and impatience had been replaced by a stutter, a hesitation in her movements. He wondered if she'd turn back if he suggested they do so.

"Puffy?" he ventured, attempting to catch her gaze.

The captain inhaled deeply, her gaze hardening. "Come what may," she whispered under her breath, just loud enough that Ranboo heard her.

She then took a prominent step through the portal, Sam's hound at her side. Fundy was next, face still elated by his small mechanical victory.

When it came to his turn, Ranboo pulled out his memory book. Opening at a new page, he scribbled down a single sentence., or at least part of one.

Today, we save Sam, or

Or what? He had no idea, but that was the best way to sum up his thoughts. Before long, the journal was pocketed once more, and the screams of the Nether swallowed him whole.

Ranboo had been into Pandora's Vault once, and only once. That single time hadn't ended well at all, and ever since, the hybrid had retained a general distaste for the prison as a whole. Now he was back in its belly.

How terrifying.

"The lights are still on," Ranboo noted as they stepped into the lobby. The glare from the redstone lamps was blinding, especially in stark contrast to the eerie shadows crowded around them.

Fundy lingered somewhere behind the hybrid, ears flattened and seemingly nervous. "This place is scary," he mumbled. Of course, this was likely his first ever time inside the Vault. Ranboo hoped it would be his last.

Captain Puffy took a deep breath. "I know," she replied. She started forwards. "The quicker we find Sam, the better."

She took out the keys, and opened one of the doorways. The blackstone creaked, and the Vault's mechanics whirred to life once again. Fran began to bark.

Much further in the prison, a dying man raised his head. The squeaks and squeals of the machines had awoken him suddenly, ringing inside his ears. He hesitated for a long while, waiting for the hallucination to die down. It never did.

Sam dragged his stiff body to the middle of the cell, his hand still stuck to his wound. His life was still draining, only faster. Faster and faster. The potion was finally starting to wear off, but he still had enough strength to try and investigate what was going on.

Working gears? Opening gates? That was impossible! The keys had been stolen, there were no other copies, and...

A dog barked, loud and shrill. Sam froze to the spot. A bark. A dog. A living creature, inside the Vault! There was no way an animal could have got in on their own, or anyone else for that matter!

A moment later, there it was again; the bark, this time ending with a familiar whine. A whimper so familiar, in fact, that Sam almost collapsed with grief at the vision of a life he had lost. A hallucination, that's all it could be. The barking was getting closer and closer, or so it seemed.

A dream?

A reality?

The last wish of a dying man?

He was only certain of one thing: there was *no way* Fran was inside Pandora's Vault.

The prison hadn't changed. Despite the chaotic storming it had endured, Dream's escape and whatever panic the Warden must have gone through, everything had stayed the way it was. The long, dark hallways, the lava pockets and the endless queue of security measures.

Puffy managed to lead her companions through as best she could, struggling to remember where the locks were and which levers to pull or buttons to press. During her own visit, she had focused almost exclusively on Sam, if only to avoid dreading what was to come. Yet with every memory that flashed in front of her eyes, every glimpse of her friend she got drowned her in a state she couldn't describe.

There was the happiness and the relief, of course. Sam was kind, he was gentle and he was constantly making sure she was alright. He was nothing like the strict and harsh warden many feared. Right now, they were on their way to save him and take him somewhere where he'd be loved and cared for.

Then there came the sadness, the hopelessness. That prison visit had dealt a heavy blow to their relationship, resulting in Puffy not being able to say a final goodbye to him on that fateful, fateful day. What if they were too late now? What if Sam was already gone, leaving behind a battered, frozen body for them to weep upon?

Fran was the first of the group to go through each new, raised barrier, nose glued to the ground and taken over by a suddenly serious instinct. All the other three had to do was follow her as she plodded around in circles, following her master's scent where he paced, where he walked, where he stepped when he was still alive. Once faced with the giant Vault door, Fran dashed to the stone staircase spiraling up to hidden quarters and began to scratch at a pile lying at the foot.

Puffy approached soon after, and rummaged through with the dog. Of course Sam had been fatally injured; what had possessed him to remove his armor completely and leave it behind? Where had that unreasonable paranoia gone? His dark green cloak and his gas-mask had also been cast aside with the rest.

There was still no sign of their bearer.

Puffy picked up the mask and traced the indents in it. Scratches marred its surface, stained red by redstone dust. She *hoped* it was redstone dust.

Fundy's voice echoed somewhere behind her. "Where could he be?"

"This place is huge," Ranboo added, his hand landing on her shoulder.

Puffy bristled, and stood up. She didn't realize that she was still holding the mask until the hybrid gently pried it from her hands.

"It's fine," she told them. "We'll find him, we have to."

Suddenly, Fran yelped. Turning around the captain watched as she began scrabbling at the heavily fortified Vault door in front of them, whimpering and barking.

"I smell blood." Puffy was pushed aside as Fundy followed the dog, his nose to the air. His ears flattened and he wrinkled his snout. "A lot of blood."

Blood. But at least they could smell it. It must have been fresh. They were getting close.

Without thinking, Puffy rushed to unlock the next part of the prison. The locks and gears on the door moved seamlessly against one another – drawing an awe-filled gasp from Fundy – before letting them through. They journeyed on, picking up the pace. Traps and security barriers were banished and raised.

A single cry escaped her, fuelled by the hope and the determination that had since started to grow again.

"SAM!"

The call of his name. He heard that, and it was unmistakable. He raised his head again. The dog continued barking, and feeble footsteps began to get closer. Closer and closer. The voice called again. He could almost hear the roaring of the waves and the chiming of harbor bells, the melodies of the sea shanties and the screeching of the gulls. He could hear the Captain.

Sam dragged himself further toward the lava barrier, and he screamed.

"PUFFY!"

It was pathetic, and barely rose over the bubbling of the divide. But maybe, just maybe, it was loud enough to be heard.

"PUFFY!"

She froze, and so did her companions.

"Was that...?"

Sam.

"I... I wasn't the only one who heard that, right?" Ranboo stuttered, looking at them each in turn. "I'm... I'm not going—"

"He's alive," Puffy interrupted him, gaze focused forward. The long corridors beckoned, although this time she actually wanted to run through them. "He's alive."

Something snapped in her, something big. She ran, not caring to see if Fundy or Ranboo were keeping up. Fran leapt at her side, howling and brushing against her legs, keeping her on the right track. That wasn't needed; she knew exactly where to run now she was pulled to it.

"SAM!"

He was heard. He was actually *heard*. A fire ignited, and his strength returned to his body.

"PUFFY!"

"HOLD ON! I'M HERE!"

Hooves and paws thundered against the obsidian. Keys rang as loud as church bells. A heart pounded erratically, dragging Puffy towards the cries.

"PUFFY!"

"SAM!"

All at once, his body began to weaken. His vocal chords were dry, screamed raw until they resembled and felt like scratched leather. His yells were heard. He was being saved. But how long would he last afterwards?

Drip! Drip! Drip!

His final life continued to drain in front of his very eyes. Lady Death was striding closer to him, so impossibly closer. She and his last life began to fight a raging battle, and it was unclear who would emerge the victor.

The holding cell. What a dreadful place to be locked up in, let alone slowly die. She was so close now, so close. The captain began to shove the first key she got her hands on into the lock. It didn't fit. She tried another, and another. So close. She couldn't give up. Her hands began to shake, and it took some extra help to finally pull the lava down. Ranboo steadied her as she turned the correct key, and Fundy pulled down the lever.

The prison growled, welcoming its intruders to the final challenge that awaited them. The most important part of the mission. The one that, if they weren't fast or careful enough, could go horribly, horribly wrong.

Through blurred, half-lidded eyes, Sam finally saw them. Saw four, shining saviors across the chasm, beams of light in the darkness.

"SAM!"

The voices of angels. The music filled his ears.

The otherworldly beings sent over a bridge, a way across the pits of Hell. A blessing, a miracle. He forced himself to stand for them, to fight to show any form of respect towards their generosity. Weakened knees and running blood made it all the harder, until he finally took one step onto the vessel destined to carry him over.

The bridge jerked along. Gods, Sam never realized how much he hated it until he was lying down on its smooth, hard surface. Every stutter pounded into his body, drawing brutal breaths from his lungs, filled with so few ounces of oxygen. It was sharp and jarring, rocking him back and forth. He wanted to throw up into the lava, but restrained himself at the last minute.

All at once, the flying machine hit solid land and finally, he collapsed onto something other than dark obsidian. Something softer and warmer. Something safer that he loved more than all the redstone machines and inescapable prisons he could ever create.

"Sam!"

Puffy gasped as his weight almost toppled her over, and she lowered them both gently down to the ground. He was pale, too pale. Every part of him seemed to have lost its spark, and the vibrant green freckles, hair and eyes had never looked duller. She tried to lift his head up, bringing it to her shoulder.

"It's alright," she breathed in his ear. "We're here. You're not alone."

He was alive, he was alive! *Oh gods*, he was alive!

"Puffy." Her name was uttered in a weakened gasp. In contrast, his bloody-handed grip on her had never been stronger. "You're... you're real..."

Puffy leaned down and buried her face next to his neck; that one place she curled up in when she could, that one spot that reassured them both. Unspoken, the comfort was stronger than ever.

"I'm real," she whispered. "I'm here, I promise."

"Please, listen to me. I'm going to—" He broke off, coughing violently. The congealed blood on his stomach shifted, bleeding more abundantly than ever.

The captain desperately tried to close the wounds, pressing his stomach down as hard as she could. She knew exactly what he was going to say. "No! No you're not!" She gritted her teeth, concentrating on saving his life. "You're gonna shut up this second and save your strength!"

"My prison," Sam smirked. "Don't tell me what to do."

She ignored him, and ripped off the bloodied, useless bandages from around his stomach. Folded and immobilised by the crimson pouring out of the wound, they looked like tendrils. She tore them off him and dropped them into a vacuous, slimy pile to the side.

"Fundy," she ordered, transfixed by the seriousness of Sam's injuries. "Run and get help. Now!"

The fox paused, rooted to the spot by the sheer horror of the scene. It was only when Ranboo gave him a small shove that he finally reacted, making sure his cap was firmly planted back on his head before he darted off. His tail whipped out behind him like copper lightning.

"I'm sorry..."

Puffy looked back at Sam, whose eyes were brimming with tears. "Shhh," she soothed, brushing a lock of sticky, sweat soaked hair out of his eyes.

"If anything I ever did or said hurt you, I'm sorry."

Her heart ached more than ever. She had forgiven him time and time again. Now she just wanted him to live. She *needed* him to live.

He was a part of her.

She burst into tears. "I forgive you," she blurted out, turning her head and desperately pressing kiss after kiss to his cheek. "I'll always forgive you. I'm sorry, Sam, I'm sorry..."

His grasp was weak, and yet he somehow still managed to tighten it. It was just enough to make her believe for a second that everything was fine.

But he needed to save his strength. Why was he wasting it on her?

"Sam..."

"Ranboo?"

The hybrid stepped forward, visibly nervous. His anxious little tic of combing through his hair or the bushy end of his tail was back, a lot more prominent than before. If Puffy's arms weren't already full, she would have rushed to him and reassured him too. She'd be the rock for both of them, just as she knew they'd both be her anchors.

Ranboo took a deep breath, and crouched down beside them. "I'm sorry, Sam," he began, eyes closed. "I don't expect you to—"

In a sudden movement, Sam's hand shot out and gently gripped Ranboo's. "I forgive you," he whispered. "But you'd be insane to forgive me after how I acted with you. You were scared, and you needed someone, and I wasn't... I wasn't..."

He tried to speak, but the end of his sentence came out as a strangled cry. Puffy went back to cuddling him, whispering whatever she could into his ears, and prayers to whatever gods could possibly be listening. What more could she do? The captain saw Ranboo flinch when Sam yelled, undoubtedly haunted by similar cries he had heard all throughout his young life.

"Sam, Puffy's right," the hybrid said, eventually finding a calm and even voice. "Shut up."

That line, although echoing a worried order, made Sam smile. His hands found theirs again, capturing them in a frozen touch – one of Ranboo's long, narrow fingered hands, speckled with black and white, and one of Puffy's own pale ones, light and as soft as velvet. In contrast, Sam's hands were rough and calloused, ridden with cuts and burns scattered across their surface, and now blood too.

"At least let me say I love you both." Cold lips pressed a gentle kiss to the backs of their fingers. A warm wave washed over the captain, and she choked down a sob. "I've been a dick, but I love you both so much and whatever happens to me, I don't want you to forget that..."

"Don't say that," Puffy scolded. "You'll be fine!"

Again, he hit her with a soft grin and a sarcastic sigh. "Gods above, we will never be honest with each other, will we?"

A weak hand came up to cup her cheek. She held it tightly.

"Why did you come back?"

She laughed, tears running abound. "Because you need me, and I need you. Come what may, remember?"

Puffy leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Her heart beat faster, threatening to tear itself out of her chest and give her final life to him. He had to live.

He sighed again, his breath dragging out for impossibly longer – much longer than it should have. His chest relaxed, as did the rest of his body.

"Sam?" Ranboo squeaked in a high, terrified voice.

"No, no, no!" Puffy desperately tried to hold Sam upright, dragging her palms over him in an effort to warm him up. "Don't die on me like this, *please!*"

There was a laugh. Much less teasing and light-hearted. Dark and ironic. Dry and real. "Then keep begging," Sam mumbled. "I don't think I have much choice..."

"You always have a choice," Puffy choked, pulling him impossibly closer to her, "and I want you to choose to live."

Chapter Fifty: Reciprocity

"Room for another traveller?"

Technoblade immediately perked up, alert. In a flash, he spun around, his axe lifted up high. In the light of the campfire, the speaker stopped.

"What do you want?" the piglin snorted, his grip tightening. He hunched his shoulders, adding to his already threatening frame in an attempt to deter the potential attacker. The voices clamoured, screeching in delight. They were waiting patiently for the first blow to be dealt.

Blood! Blood! Blood!

The stranger drew his golden sword from its sheath, and dropped it down on the dusty, dry ground of the forest clearing. He took a step back, and raised his hands. "I mean no

trouble," he said. "I only wish to share your fire for the night." He reached for the purse hanging from his belt. "I can pay."

Technoblade inspected the newcomer. Dressed in a dark, moth-eaten cloak that was frayed around the hems and with a sack slung over his shoulder, the traveller was scruffy, and seemed to have come from far. The piglin lowered his weapon, and sat back down beside the fire.

"Your money means nothing to me," he grumbled half-heartedly. Reluctantly, the piglin beckoned him over.

The stranger joined him, and dumped his things beside Techno's. The single log they shared as seating creaked under both their weights, and the flames spat at their feet. The traveller removed his cloak, and quickly set about warming his hands.

"Thank you," he said, his voice gentle and relaxed.

In comparison, Technoblade grunted, still cautious. "Don't mention it," he mumbled, poking the embers with a rogue stick.

He observed the stranger closely. There was still a lingering air of suspicion as he did, but it was headed by a strong curiosity. Green patches and freckles were scattered all over the traveller's visible skin, the shades as varied as the woodland greenery they were sheltered by. The same colours had seemingly spread to his hair, mixing with scarce strands of light brown. His eyes were completely black and if it wasn't for the vibrant green irises, Techno was ready to bet that they were none other than empty eye sockets.

The stranger crossed his gaze, likely sensing the stare. "So," he began. "Which part of the Nether are you from?"

Technoblade bristled. "Excuse me?" The voices spat at what they considered an insult.

"The Nether. It must be a lot different, travelling here in the Overworld."

Although the question was asked nicely, with no audible ill-intent behind the words, the piglin still held it in contempt. His reply was short and cold. "Not all piglins come from there." He flicked a stray ember back into the campfire with the toe of his boot.

The stranger appeared to have caught on to his host's discomfort, and backed down. "I'm sorry, I just assumed—"

"Lots of people do," Techno mumbled, then shot him another look, taking in his appearance. A curt and insulting term came to mind, and it slipped out of his mouth before he had the chance to think it through. "Creeper."

Creeper! Creeper! Creeper!

Gods, the voices liked that quip.

To his surprise, the stranger smiled. "I guess it's only fair," he chuckled, briefly running a hand over some of his green patches. "One assumption for another, right?"

One of the piglin's long-time philosophies had always been the following: "Treat others the way they treat you." It was a system of reciprocity that always made his world go around, from merchant trades to bounty hunting, and he was somewhat pleasantly surprised that the traveller understood it as well. He nodded, a newly found respect blooming within him for both that and the absence of any form of offense taken by his comment. "Exactly."

"If you must know," the stranger told him. "It was because of a potion experiment gone wrong. The antidote didn't work as well as the alchemist intended."

"Ah, unfortunate..." Techno paused a couple of moments before continuing. "I was cursed, myself."

"Seems we've both been wronged by magic then, huh?"

Technoblade wasn't used to so much conversation, and he shifted a little. "I guess we have."

The thoughts of his predicament were far from happy, and he tried to avoid the tale as much as possible. Trying to change the subject, he got up to check the potatoes roasting over the open flames. They simmered on the boiling surface of a banged-up cauldron balanced between a couple of branches. Techno grazed his hand over the metal, barely flinching as the heat seared the thick fur on his hand. The stars in their multitude lit up the sky framed by the circle of pine trees, their constellations much more visible than they were in the cities.

As a child, Techno would count them. As a teenager, he learned their stories. As an adult, they became his only friends on the road.

"You're The Blade, aren't you?"

Techno's previous hostility returned, and he lashed out at the stranger, his tusks glinting in the firelight. "What's it to you?"

The traveller, miraculously, managed to keep himself calm and composed, even when faced with a piglin's outburst. "Nothing. I just saw your picture on the wanted posters."

"You and half the universe. I'm sure you saw the reward money as well, didn't you?" The piglin made a move to reach for his axe.

"Like you, money means very little to me. I'm not here to turn you in for a few measly pouches of gold, or whatever the currency around these parts is."

Techno paused his movement. The voices in his head screamed for blood. The sane part of his mind screamed for them to stop. For once, he judged the situation himself. There was something about the man's explanation that felt genuine, and the kindness in his eyes didn't escape him. Perhaps the kindness could have been mistaken for pity, and Techno couldn't blame him if it was.

A life on the road, when one was stalked and hunted, was something he would never wish on anyone, no matter how much pain the voices demanded him to inflict on others. At times, it was beautiful: to be free to roam where one wanted, to uncover hidden trails that lead to gorgeous landscapes and track down both marvellous beasts and glittering treasure. However, most of the time, it was hell: the constant fear of being murdered in one's sleep, the lack of warmth and security, the harshness of the elements. The added burden of the voices weighed down as heavily as everything else did.

"Good." Technoblade sat down again, still keeping his weapon at a close distance. "If you were here to kill me, I would have made you pay."

*Blood For The Blood God! Blood For The Blood God! Blood For The Blood God! Blood
For The Blood God! Blood For The Blood God!*

The voices' chanting was incessant.

The stranger let out a small laugh, clearly a little nervous. "Fortunately, that isn't the case, Blade," he smiled.

The piglin poked the fire again. "Technoblade is fine," he grunted. "Or Techno."

"Alright then, Techno." The stranger gave him a small nod. "I'm Sam."

At first, Techno was about to retaliate with a rhetorical question along the lines of "Did I ask?", but upon realizing that the traveller was trying to be friendly, he kept his mouth shut. It had been so long since anyone had treated him as an equal, or even as a friend, and he had to admit that the change was nice.

Instead, he tried to banish both the voices and his hostility. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was heading north," Sam replied. "But I couldn't make it to the next village before nightfall."

"Luckily you came across me, then," Techno hummed, checking on the food again. "The woods are a dangerous place in the dark."

"I know. Everything is at night, don't you think?"

Technoblade honestly didn't have an opinion on the matter. Dangerous for others? Yes. For himself? Unless he was caught off guard because of his own mistakes, no. "I guess."

"I've heard a lot about you," Sam said suddenly.

It didn't surprise Techno, but he was far from happy. His eyes narrowed. "Have you," he muttered. "What have you heard exactly...?"

"Legends, stories, ballads," the traveller began to reel off, counting on his fingers. "The usual things they use when talking of a great warrior."

A great warrior. The piglin had heard the legends and the stories, and songs – although he had never stayed in one place long enough to enjoy them – seemed plausible as well. Whether they were accurately portraying the truth however was up for debate.

Sam must have been pondering the same question, as he asked, "How many of those are factual?"

Not knowing himself, Techno dodged the question. "You're a very curious one," he pointed out.

The traveller shrugged. "I guess I am. I see it as a strength."

"They say curiosity killed the cat."

"But it's also a redstoner's friend. Curiosity is what fuels the craft."

"Redstone?" Techno had certainly heard of it before, although the ore and its multiple uses were still unknown territory for him. He put two and two together. "An engineer, eh? It's rare to see those around, especially dressed like a peddler and on the road."

The piglin must have lightly touched the other's ego, as Sam puffed out his chest proudly. "I've just finished my sixth year of studying," he said. "I'm heading up north for my final course. After that, I'll be a Grand Master."

Technoblade admired his pride, and couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm. Although his behavior could have been considered a little childish, his deep, calm voice and mannerisms gave it a wise maturity. "You must be quite good then."

"What can I say? I'm cracked at the craft!" He chuckled.

A twig snapped somewhere behind them, and they looked around in unison.

Nothing.

They turned back to the campfire.

Techno's eyes darted to the other's hands. "Gloves," he said.

"What?"

"You might want to think about using gloves." The piglin gestured to Sam's fingers, tipped with red. "The dust is staining, and it looks like you killed someone."

The man briefly looked at the tips of his hands. "Good point," he agreed, subconsciously trying to wipe them off on his clothes.

All of a sudden, an arrow whipped over their heads, and stuck itself in a nearby tree trunk. Immediately, both of them jumped up. Techno held his axe tightly and Sam reached for his golden sword.

The piglin sniffed the air, alert. "Pillagers," he growled. He looked at his companion. "You do know how to fight, right?"

"I'm better at redstone than fighting," the other confessed.

The voices began to holler for blood, and Techno nodded quickly. "If you feel like you can't take them, run. I'll hold them off." From the way the traveller frowned, his pride was wounded, but he nevertheless nodded in agreement.

Stomping and clanking echoed from the underbrush and before long, the makeshift camp was under siege. There were five well-armed, battle scarred pillagers, cloaked in dark clothes and armour. Their eyes glinting maliciously in the firelight. One of them held a loaded crossbow, three of them hatchets and the other a trident. They rushed at the travellers with high-pitched cries. Technoblade and Sam were ready for them.

When the blade of his axe hit the first bandit, Techno saw nothing but red. The addicting scent of blood filled his nostrils, and a deep growl rumbled in his throat. The voices were gloating and cheering as he swung his battle-axe, and although he knew they would never be satisfied, he was relieved that they were being nourished for the time being.

In a couple of hits, the first pillager was down, the corpse basking in a lake of crimson. The piglin's frenzy broke for just a moment, and he cast a look over to his new companion.

From what he saw, Sam was having a much harder time than he did, crossing blades with one of the hatchet-wielding pillagers. The piglin spied a few missed opportunities Sam could have taken to stab his opponent, and his grip on his sword's hilt was somewhat clumsy. There was no rhythm or art to his swings, and if it wasn't for him ducking and weaving, his head would have been cut clean off multiple times. He must have realized he was losing, as he frantically reached for something around his belt. He blew a handful of red, sparkling powder into the pillager's eyes, which deterred them just long enough for Sam to gain the upper hand.

The piglin was about to leap in to help him, when two other assailants swung at him. Again, the blood-red veil descended and the screaming well of voices begged for violence. One he managed to slice down with a couple, clean swings of his axe, and kicked the hatchet from their dead hands. The other one took a minute or two to finally kill. The skilled trident manoeuvres blocked most of his attacks and hits.

Something suddenly hit Techno's foot, and he glanced down. A golden sword glinted in the low light, and further away, Sam was pinned to the ground, powerless. His rival kept a knee on his chest, and raised the hatchet above their victim's head.

The piglin wasted no time in discarding his own battleaxe, and grabbed the trident he was battling against in both hands. With a bone-breaking tug, he ripped it out of the pillager's hands, and tossed it over to Sam. "Take it!" he yelled, and knocked out his own opponent with a strong uppercut to their jaw.

He didn't know if Sam had heard him. Picking up his own weapon again, he brought it down on the unconscious body, chopping it up. spurts of crimson blood shot out of the

wounds, staining his legs and his linen shirt. The voices revelled, drinking up the scene like fine wine.

Technoblade turned back to Sam, once again worried, and was somewhat surprised to find him standing and fighting off his enemy with much more confidence and skill. Long and pronged, the trident seemed to have awoken something in him, and the way he wielded it was decidedly much less clumsy than his sword. In a matter of moments, Sam thrust the prongs forwards, stabbing the pillager in the gut. He twisted the weapon, and the screaming stopped.

Silence fell over them once again. The camp was motionless, broken only by the hooting of an owl that had undoubtedly witnessed the entire fight. Techno grabbed his axe once again.

He called over to Sam. "Are you alright?"

Ripping the weapon out of the corpse, Sam panted heavily. "I..." He swallowed. "Yes."

The piglin let out a small sigh of relief. "That's good to—"

"TECHNO! LOOK OUT!"

Before Technoblade could react, something long whistled past his ear, followed by a scream. Spinning around, he saw the last bandit hanging limply against a tree, the trident planted into their neck with pinpoint accuracy. The loaded crossbow they held dropped out of their cold, dead hands, falling to the ground.

Sam made his way past the piglin, and tore the trident from the pillager. Techno watched his eyes. They were wide and shocked. The body fell to the floor, and his companion gaped at the blood dripping from the prongs.

Techno glanced from the weapon up to the man. "Have you ever fought with a trident before?" he asked.

Sam looked over at him. "No," he said.

"You're good."

"Well, I told you: I'm cracked at the craft!" He chuckled, his face falling a little as he watched the blood drip. "I'm guessing that's quite a compliment, coming from a fabled warrior, right?"

Technoblade looked out over the battlefield with Sam. The fire was all but trampled out, and almost every surface was flooded with blood. The dead were scattered all over the ground, heads and limbs twisted at odd angles.

"Perhaps." Licking his lips, the cool, metallic taste of blood touched the piglin's tongue. It almost drove him insane again. Blood for the Blood God. But all he did was wipe it off his snout with the back of his sleeve. "You should keep it."

"Keep what?"

"The trident. You use it much better than the sword."

Pondering the offer, Sam gazed at the weapon in his hands. He tossed it from hand to hand. It was decently sized and ornate, too richly adorned to be the work of a rogue bandit. It was most likely a stolen weapon from an unlucky noble struck down on the road. "Maybe I will," he said. His tone lowered. "I've never killed anyone before..."

Techno was far from fazed by the carnage. "Well, there's a first time for everything." Two victims. That was a satisfactory first-time body-count. He wasn't fazed by the gore, but was slightly shaken by the close call with the crossbow. If Sam hadn't been there, he would have bled out, alone, in the middle of the woods. "You saved my lives."

"No, you saved mine," Sam replied with a smile and a small, grateful nod. Techno stared at the long, thin cut stretching from the other's forehead, down over his nose bridge and over his mouth. He wanted to say something, but from the way Sam winced ever so often, he was well aware of it.

The piglin returned the nod. "You saved mine," he said. "You chose to stay and fight."

"You gave me the trident when I needed it most."

"You saved me from the crossbow."

"That was nothing, Techno."

"You also didn't bring a battalion with you to arrest me."

Sam grinned at him. "You shared your fire with a lowly traveller."

"That's nothing but courteous behavior," Techno snorted, not backing down.

"So is saving someone's life. I guess we're even now." Before the piglin could reply, Sam gazed up at the sky. "Dawn is coming."

Techno nodded. "We should move." He didn't know how many more pillagers were roaming the woods, and it would only be a matter of hours before someone found the carnage and broken campsite. Then questions would arise, and questions were dangerous things for outlaws.

"Yes," Sam agreed, picking up his pack and his cloak. "I'm sorry about your potatoes. You seemed really eager to eat."

Techno didn't realize that he had clearly been drooling over his food before the attack. He sighed, and shrugged. "That doesn't matter, I'll eat some other time."

Sam smirked, and his gaze lingered over his golden sword, before he decided to unhook its scabbard and leave both beside the dead bandits. New trident in hand, he put on his cape and heaved his bag over his shoulder once again. "I'm sorry to have caused you trouble."

The voices screamed again, swearing and cursing. Techno ignored them. "You didn't," he said. "It was bound to happen anyway, and if it wasn't for you, I would be dead." His gaze hardened. "I owe you, Sam."

Sam laughed. "You don't owe me anything."

But the piglin did. He knew he did. Even if his new friend refused, his own sane conscience wouldn't let him drop it.

He was tempted to suggest they travel together, but he felt that his offer would be met with refusal. Although Techno didn't like to admit it, he had enough of being alone. Alone with no escape from the voices, that is. Everyone he had ever grown close to had either died, left him or, in more extreme cases, betrayed him – and Philza, the only one he still had, was unreachable.

Then again, Sam had his set path, and knew what he wanted to achieve. The Grand Masters were respected and sought after engineers. Traveling with the Blade would only ruin his reputation and any chances he had at fulfilling his goal. If the worst came to the worst, Sam would be branded as an outlaw as well, and Technoblade – despite his love for violence and war – couldn't bear to drag anyone down the same path as him.

So he bid Sam farewell and continued his journey alone. He wondered if their paths would cross again one day, and promised himself that if they did, he would make up for the rare kindness he was shown that night.

After all, piglins never forget, and Technoblade always kept his word.

Techno had never trusted the crows. Philza did, and that was fine by him because he could talk to them. The piglin couldn't, and why would he trust a flock of creatures he simply couldn't understand? He never took much notice of the crows, until now.

Their behaviour had been strange these past few mornings. The birds usually hovered over Phil's roof, awaiting him patiently on the fences or cheekily cawing in Sapnap's sleepy ears. Instead, they stayed in the air, circling the skies and darting back and forth between Ranboo's shack and Philza's cabin. Techno watched them, eyes narrowed against the sun's glare.

Ranboo hadn't come back in a while. It wasn't new as such: the hybrid usually divided his time between Snowchester and the Antarctic Commune. What made it stranger was not only the fact he was away for so long now he had been all but socially exiled, but that the birds were nervously fluttering around his home.

"Feels like an omen," Sapnap said when Techno asked him for his opinion. "I think they're trying to say something."

The piglin would be damned if he only listened to a flock of mangy crows, so he stayed put for a day or so more. It was only when the voices began to pester him about it that he finally acted on it.

Ranboo hadn't come home, or sent them a message in well over five days; as his mentor and guardian, Technoblade finally began to worry.

"If you and your little friends don't show me where Ranboo is, I'll boil you all in tonight's stew," the piglin threatened once he managed to wring the nearest crow by its neck.

He released it soon after, and the dazed bird flapped lopsidedly back up to its murder. Before long, the big, black cloud began to move towards the Southern lands, and Techno followed them, sat astride Carl. Apart from a quick trip through the Nether that cut off his view of the big blue sky, his eyes never left the crows. They led him down the paths, over the moorlands, and finally to the coastline.

The spectacle was one he had seen many times; an abandoned warzone eerily locked in time, flags and shredded tents fluttering in the breeze and upturned earth scattered around the floor. A couple of the canons remained, sitting askew with their large, charred barrels pointing straight up at the smouldering walls of Pandora's Vault, covered by ash and plaques of dried lava. So, that's where the noise he faintly heard across the ocean came from.

What had happened?

He didn't have time to try and answer the question. The crows were circling the prison. The voices were fearing the worst, and so was the piglin. He spurred Carl on, retracing his steps to the entrance. The portal was lit and the iron gates were unlocked. The Vault was left wide open. That was even more concerning.

"Gods, Ranboo, what have you done...?"

Giving Carl a gentle pat to calm his nerves, Technoblade spurred him on through the gaping gates of the prison. He crossed through the Nether's threshold and saw nothing out of place, if only a trail of dark drops that painted a path across the blackstone floor.

The Vault was silent. The Warden wasn't at the front desk, or anywhere else in the lobby's vicinity. Carl let out an anxious whinny. It was answered soon after by a sharp bark echoing from somewhere in the distance. Techno sniffed the air, and recoiled. The metallic tang of a liquid he knew all too well landed on his tongue. *Blood*.

Blood in Pandora's Vault.

Technoblade ran as fast as he could, darting through the corridors like a cannonball, crashing against the walls and scraping his weapons. His heavy cloak billowed out behind him and his unhealed dagger wound still stung under the layers and layers of bandages. Every second he didn't see his protégé's black and white body made him panic even more, and he picked up his already manic pace. Every security measure Sam had dragged him through on his first visit was raised, unlocked and bypassed.

None of this was normal.

The scent of blood was getting stronger and stronger by the minute.

None of this was normal.

Where was Ranboo?

"RANBOO!" Techno yelled, his roar echoing around the empty obsidian halls.

Someone came careening around a nearby corner, but it wasn't the hybrid. A flash of orange fur broke the dark black surroundings, and clumsily stopped in front of the piglin.

Techno would recognize that pelt anywhere, and that wasn't a particularly good thing. His execution plot by the L'Manberg officials was still a fresh grudge, and now he was faced with one of the accomplices in the matter, his fury came back stronger than ever. Then again, the fox was Wilbur's kid. He deserved a chance to explain himself. His eyes narrowed, and he rose up in front of the newcomer in all his threatening glory.

"Fundy," he growled.

The fox crossed his gaze and yelped, stumbling backwards. "B... Blade!" he stammered with wide eyes and sharp breathing.

Technoblade was far from being in a gentle mindset that would allow him to let bygones be bygones. He was far too worried. "Where's Ranboo?" he demanded with a growl. "What have you done to him?"

"Nothing!" Fundy cried. "We didn't do anything!"

"What's happening, why are you here?"

Thankfully, it seemed that Fundy still held a bit of a brain, as he was cooperating with Techno's inquiries. "It's too long to explain, but I was sent to find help!" In a sudden movement, the fox leapt to his side and clamped a paw around his bandaged forearm.

The piglin grit his teeth against the pain. "What? What happened?"

"Just follow me!"

So follow him Techno did. He let Fundy drag him through the prison, until the agony in his arm became too excruciating to bear. He ripped his body away and followed a few steps behind, still questioning the route they were taking.

It took him a while to recognize the path to the maximum security cell. It took him even longer to remember why he had been taken there in the first place, some weeks ago. And perhaps it was denial that had drawn him to forget the last detail, but he soon remembered what he had done, and what he had potentially contributed to.

The blood spilt was most likely of his own doing, yet again.

"Fundy," he grunted lowly, keeping his manners as gentle as he could.

The fox slightly turned his head to him, but kept his swift pace.

Techno tried to keep his voice even. "Who's dying?"

"How do you—"

"I smell blood," Technoblade cut him off, the voices chanting and gleefully lapping up the smell. Only a couple screamed at him, shoving guilt down his throat and into his brain.

Fundy blinked at him, his hesitation still betraying his terror of the piglin. "It's the Warden," he replied.

Sam.

No.

No... He can't have...

What was the Strength potion for? What did Dream *really* need it for? What didn't Technoblade know about his true intentions? What had he done?

What had Techno and Dream *both* done?

He got the full answer a moment later, as the barking from earlier grew louder and louder. Lava popped, voices were heard, and punctuated cries of pain reached Techno's ears. He stepped onto the scene, taking place just outside the holding cell.

"I've found someone!" Fundy yelled.

The barking soon turned into whimpers as the silvery pelt of a dog brushed against the piglin's legs.

A soft, questioning voice called to him. "Techno...?"

Ranboo was safe, Ranboo was okay.

Technoblade saw none of that. His attention was caught and hooked by another thing entirely.

The sight made him sick. Sam – the old friend he had known so briefly on the road, the fabled engineer, and the almighty Warden of Pandora's Vault – was dying. The entire front of his body, from his hands to his clothes to even parts of his face, was caked in dried, congealed blood, originating from a dark crimson cavity in his stomach. Everything about his appearance made him look weak; the bags under his eyes, the paleness of his skin and the way his breath came out in short, sharp bursts. Weak, so weak, except for the bright smile he was giving the people around him and the way his hands were tightly gripping the friend who cradled him on her lap.

"I'm fine, Puffy," Techno just managed to catch him whispering to the captain. "It doesn't hurt as much, honestly."

"You're insufferable, and you need to shut up," Puffy replied firmly. Her tone was sharp, but the meaning behind her words was so soft. The piglin had never heard someone speak with so much care and affection, and *love*.

He wanted to believe Sam. He wanted to believe his words, that everything *was* alright, that the blood covering him was only a hallucination of Techno's own making, mind corrupted by years of wars and dismembered corpses piling by his feet. Those years of bloodshed should have desensitized Technoblade to the scene, but there was a harsh difference between watching strangers bleed and watching a friend do the same. One was glorious and nourishing to the voices. The other rendered them silent.

In that silence, Techno spoke. "Puffy? Sam?"

Both heads turned to look at him. One was frightened, cheeks wet from tears and eyes wide with shock at the piglin's arrival. The other gave him a laid-back smile, eyes half closed.

"I thought I told you to never set foot in the Vault again," Sam laughed weakly, ending with a cough and a small smirk.

Technoblade crouched down by his side. "Sam, the captain's right; shut up."

"Rude..."

Techno raised his hand to Sam's forehead. "He's burning up," he said to Puffy, attempting to lift Sam out of her grasp.

She resisted, clinging onto his body for dear life. "What are you doing?" she cried, keeping the warden close to her.

"Easy, Puffy; I'm not going to hurt him. I want to save his life." He coaxed her again, only to be met with the same protective streak as before. "Please..."

"You destroyed L'Manberg! You executed my own son! How could I trust you?"

"Your– heh?" The piglin faltered for a brief moment. The voices brought him back, reminding him that there was a time for everything. He'd go down that path some other time. "Puffy–"

"Because I do," Sam mumbled, raising a comforting hand to her cheek in an effort to calm her. He eyed Techno with a warmth that only made the piglin's guilt grow. "I trust Technoblade."

"I told you, Sam, I owe you."

"That was a long time ago, Techno, and I... I want nothing in return for what I did..."

"Well man up, you're getting something anyway."

Techno tried to pick up Sam again and this time, Puffy let him, although she kept holding her friend's hand throughout. "It's alright," she whispered. "I'm not leaving. I'm right here. I'm staying by your side."

"Puffy, let go," Technoblade grunted.

He was met by a horrified look. "I can't! I can't leave him alone, wherever it is you're going to take him! He needs a friend–"

"–and he has one in me. He always will have."

"Puffy," Sam whispered. "I'll be fine, I promise."

From the strain in his voice and the rasp in his lungs, Techno could tell that the chances of that promise being kept would be halved within the next hour. His panic grew and so did his urge to get Sam out of there as soon as possible. Yet he didn't have the heart to break up what could be final goodbyes.

"Don't die on me," Puffy begged, touching her forehead to his. "Please."

"I'll keep fighting." Red tipped fingers curled once again around soft, pale digits, the blood leaving blemishes behind. "I promise."

"Ranboo," Techno barked to the hybrid somewhere behind him, who snapped to attention. "Carl's in the front lobby, make sure everything is secured and ready for our departure."

Ranboo looked like he was about to talk back and hesitate, but one look at the body in Technoblade's arms seemed to make up his mind. "You'll be fine, Sam," he said to him, giving him a shaky smile before running off.

Techno then looked back at Puffy, and her wide, sorrowful blue eyes. He pried her hand away from Sam's with all the gentleness he could – it still made her flinch.

"I'll send word as soon as I can," the piglin assured her. "You've just got to trust me."

"Can I not come with you?"

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous, and people will start getting suspicious if you suddenly disappear."

The captain rubbed her sore hand, and glared at him. "If you dare harm him in any other way, I will slaughter you without even batting an eye."

In all honesty, Techno would have loved to see her try, although now was not the time for some light-hearted teasing. He nodded sombrely.

"Understood. You and Fundy should leave this place." He took one last, long look at the dark walls above and around them. "No one should be locked in here for longer than they have to be."

And with that, the warrior went on his way, carrying out an old friend who he never thought he'd see so weak, so dead.

Ranboo met them at the entrance, and after a brief inquiry of where he had been for the past few days – which ended with a nervous hybrid mumbling that he'd explain in detail when they had time –, they saddled up, and left the Vault as fast as they could.

Carl didn't seem to mind the extra weight of both Sam and Ranboo, especially considering that they both weighed no less than a feather. One was considerably more concerning than the other, however, and every second that they weren't in the tundra, Techno panicked even more.

The blood continued to flow. It hadn't stopped. The wounds must have been so much deeper than Technoblade had first thought. Sam had stopped talking entirely, and his eyes had drifted shut. The only thing stopping Techno from calling the entire rescue a failure and giving up was the frantic barks and yelps of a worried silver dog, who bounded in time with Carl's strides. She kept the riders awake and aware. Fran hadn't left her master's side, and it was clear she wasn't going to anytime soon. Technoblade wasn't going to shoo her away.

The Nether was boiling, but not as scalding as Sam's forehead, which Techno routinely pressed his large hand to.

"T... Techno..." Sam breathed out at some point just as the Antarctic Commune came into view. His eyes had briefly fluttered open, glassy and unseeing. "I... I can't see anything..."

"We're almost there," the piglin assured him, pushing the steed under them to his limits. "We're almost there."

He fiddled with a small glass vial, emptying the contents into Sam's mouth just as they crossed the portal frame. Some of the Healing potion spilled, but a decent amount had found its mark, hopefully being able to keep Sam conscious a little longer.

The last stretch was undoubtedly the hardest to traverse, and the make-or-break of Sam's survival. The cold, the snowflakes that stung like iced spikes and a wind so violent it even threatened to tip Techno over. Carl's horseshoes – carefully crafted to help him cross the tundra – had been worn down by the dusty netherrack and cobblestone tracks. Now, the stallion was slipping in the snow, resorting to leaping as far as he could and crashing down on his front legs, all without breaking his stride. It made for a stomach-churning, bumpy race.

Technoblade could feel Ranboo's long fingers grip onto his shoulders for dear life, all while the piglin wrapped the reins a few more times around his beefy forearms. When he was tethered to his horse, entrusting his life to him once again, he used all his remaining strength to shelter the dying from the harshness of the weather. It wasn't ideal, and it did nothing to stop Sam from trembling uncontrollably, but it was enough. Just enough until the faraway lights weren't so far away anymore. Technoblade didn't even have to shout for anyone, as Sapnap was already emerging from Phil's cabin and rushing towards them.

"Techno! What's going on?" Even as he drew closer, the snowstorm whisked away his words.

Techno dismounted, and let Ranboo lead Carl to his stable. "The fire, now," he ordered, pushing past the fireborn and banging open his front door.

The makeshift bed he had made for the once-frozen Ranboo in the corner was still there, and he wasted no time in gently laying down the man he was carrying. Sam cried out, his body still apparently honing enough energy to writhe around and yell in agony. In a flash, Fran rushed to his side and pressed her big wet nose into the palm of his shaking hand.

"Sam?" Ssnap suddenly choked out from the doorway, staring at the scene. "What's he... What...?"

Techno snapped his head back to him. "Ssnap, the fire! NOW!"

The fireborn didn't need telling twice. Once the hearth was ablaze, Techno finally hesitated. His mind went blank for a moment, for a reason he didn't know.

Sam was bleeding. A lot. The rims had crusted, sure, and his clothes were bunched up and stiff, but they did nothing to stop the flow. It was like using a canvas to catch a waterfall. The Healing potion he had given him didn't seem to stop the gushing.

What could he do?

What to do? What to do?

Technoblade had cured many ailments, on himself and others, but they were all merely flesh wounds. This... This was something else entirely. One false move and Techno would have claimed another life to add to the well of voices buzzing in his brain. He didn't want this one in there. If it ever did find its way to the others, it would be the one to finally push Technoblade into pure and utter insanity.

All of a sudden, a dark shadow stretched over them, and the Angel of Death stood at the door.

Techno sighed, relieved. "Phil, I need your expertise! Quickly, there's no time to lose!"

But Philza stayed put, eyes locked on the dying figure in the bed even as Ssnap rushed in and out with whatever he seemed to think Technoblade might need. None of his crows cried, and not one of his feathers ruffled. He looked as stone cold and still as Pandora's Vault was.

"Phil?" Technoblade tried to call again, puzzled and alarmed at his reluctance to do anything. "We need bandages and thread and--"

Philza still didn't move. *He didn't move.*

His shocked stare towards Sam had soon morphed into something else entirely, something that Techno had only seen a few times. It was the look that belonged to the monarchs and tyrants during executions; that misplaced serenity, the pursed lips and the head held high as someone else's was brought down. It was a stare the piglin never thought he'd see plastered onto Philza's own face. It was a stare that made him lose it.

"PHILZA, NOW!" he roared, startling even himself.

The winged man stumbled back into reality, catching his friend's gaze. All traces of that stone-cold hostility had faded into the same worry that had taken over the rest of the people Technoblade had met that day. He quickly nodded, and dashed off back to his cabin.

Techno allowed himself to breathe a little more freely, and turned back to Sam. His hound was resting her head against his arm and although he was still breathing unnaturally fast with undoubtedly oxygen-lacking lungs, the piglin knew his chances were good.

He pressed a reassuring yet firm hand to the Sam's chest. It was to calm him, of course, but also to immobilise him if he chose to lash out when they began treating him. Techno knew from experience that having a needle stuck into one's arm was far from pleasant, and that was only one wound. It appeared that Sam had three separate ones that needed cleaning and stitching. However, the piglin knew Sam was strong, and he would make it. *He would make it*, and that in of itself was enough to smear the hint of a smile across his snout.

"Reciprocity does wonders, my friend," he chuckled, just as the voices began to prepare him for the next, long period of the Antarctic Commune's history.

Chapter Fifty-One: The Song Of The Swallows

A spruce forest, just outside the Greater SMP. The earth was damp from the recent rainfalls and water droplets dripped down from the pine needles. Between the branches, one could just glimpse the ramparts that ran around Eret's castle, the guards relentlessly patrolling with burning torches in their hands. They occasionally stopped and squinted into the forest, crossbows at the ready, before moving on a minute later.

The patrols had been relentless for the past few days and the fires on top of the watchtowers were constantly lit. Dream wasn't afraid of them; he had been slipping under their noses almost daily. It was amazing how blind some of them could really be.

He had been hiding out in the woods ever since he was let out, foraging for berries and drinking from streams. Every day, he sat on a rotting tree-stump beside a beaten track, waiting. Waiting and listening. After a few days, he heard the gentle strumming of a guitar, and the trotting of little hooves in the distance.

Finally after a long search, he had found the person he was looking for, or rather, the ghost. He took off his white, rounded mask, letting the ghost see his face. "Ghostbur?"

The ghostly figure turned around, startled. His pearly white eyes widened in shock, and he dropped the blue in his hand. "D... Dream?" he stammered.

Ghostbur looked terrified by Dream's presence, gripping onto his blue sheep's fleece and trying to utter a single word. It appeared that even the blue he loved so dearly wasn't enough to soothe him.

Dream laughed. "Relax, Ghostbur," he said, holding his hands up. "I just want to talk."

"I... but..." The phantom's eyes darted to something behind the warrior, who knew exactly what he was staring at.

"You recognize this trident, don't you?" He touched it lightly, securing it once more between the leather harness.

"I..." Ghostbur faltered. "Why are you here?"

Dream smiled sweetly once again. "I've been let out," he said, conscious about how sensitive and honest the phantom was. "I'm a changed man, Ghostbur. Look!" He gestured to the trident once again. "Sam even gave me his own weapon, a mark of his trust in me."

The phantom still didn't look comfortable, and Dream noted his silent footsteps as he attempted to escape backwards. The warrior crouched down, lightly petting Friend in the

process. Even the sheep seemed to fear him, trotting nervously backwards and pressing his woolly blue body against Ghostbur's legs.

Stupid sheep, ready to ruin everything.

Dream stood up before the ghost could notice his pet's strange behaviour. "I heard you playing, outside the Vault."

Ghostbur tilted his head, more surprised than frightened. "You... you did?" he asked, almost in disbelief.

The warrior laughed. "Of course I did, you were the highlight of my days!" Watching the phantom's expression change and a bright, childish smile spread across his face, Dream pushed his compliments further. "In fact, your music made me realize how truly lonely and horrible my punishment was, and inspired me to change myself for the better. Great things always come from a new outlook on everything."

The ghost looked at him up and down – at Dream and the same green clothes he was known for – and laughed. "Changing your world without changing your clothes," he said, tentatively cracking what the warrior took as a joke.

Dream laughed even louder, hoping that Ghostbur wouldn't detect the forced nature of his friendliness. "Exactly! You're a bright one."

"I'm relieved," Ghostbur sighed. "Everyone was yelling about how you escaped the prison, but they don't know the real story!"

"Well, often only one side of history is looked at," Dream replied. "I guess I was an unlucky one."

Again.

"They shouldn't be mean to you," the phantom huffed, crossing his arms and pouting. "In fact, we should go and tell them the whole truth! I'm sure they'll listen to me!"

"Don't worry about that, Ghostbur, they've always listened to you. However, as much as I would like to help spread the good word across the land, I was looking for you for something else."

Ghostbur looked intrigued. "Really? What is it?"

Dream smiled, and held out his hand. "How would you like to feel the world again?"

A mountain chain, somewhere to the far, far west of the realms of the SMP. Jagged peaks lush with pine forests surrounded large, crater-like clearings of soft golden-green grass and vibrant wildflowers.

A beautiful stone monastery sat in shambles along the side of one of the rock faces, overgrown by ivy and other parasitic plants. Soft moss spread in between the stones like heavenly carpets, small animals scampering over them, mouths full with the sweetest of berries. The sunlight filtered through the stained-glass windows, illuminating the broken shards scattered across the floor. Long stone corridors encircled an inner courtyard with a dried up fountain and bushes of tangled brown briar. However, despite the few dark corners and twisted stone statues, the place was far too light and airy to feel sinister.

The oldest legends said that this deeply religious place was wiped clean by the doings of dragons and evil fairies. The real story was simply that the monks who lived there found no gods and chose to move on, surrendering their home to the passage of time.

Just outside the monastery, a lake stretched out underneath one of the peaks, reflecting the mountains like a perfect mirror. The waters, although they should have been warm at such a high altitude, were refreshingly cold, constantly disturbed by the waterfall that trickled down the mountainside.

It was such a peaceful place. Yells were carried far over the peaks, but secrets were kept safely within the enclosed space, the dark mountains acting as solemn keepers. Whatever happened there stayed there.

At least for now.

"What are you doing?"

Dream's eyes snapped open, and he shifted. The water, previously still and warm, turned cold, splashing against him and scattering frozen spots across his skin. Suppressing a cry of surprise, he lifted his arms off the bank and sank down beneath the ripples. His ears numbed as the liquid rushed in, trying to squeeze between his eyelashes and playing with his hair. His skin – reduced to nothing more than a leathery shell during his time in Pandora's Vault – breathed once again, gently prying open cuts, scars and burns and cleaning them out.

He rose up a few moments later, taking a deep breath and shivering as a stream of water trickled down his chin. Soaked hair stuck to his neck, as thick and heavy as golden drapes. He settled back down against the earth bank, wrinkled fingers playing with the occasional, tiny fish who got too close to him.

"Thinking," he finally answered, absent-mindedly catching a guppy in the crook of his palm.

"Ah, I see. Please don't mind me, then." There was a shuffle as the figure behind him sat down on the grass, and the screech of thick strings as an instrument was tuned.

Dream watched the fish in his palm as it thrashed back and forth in the shallow pool of water that hadn't slipped between his fingers. So helpless, trapped in a prison of torture, slowly losing the few breaths of air it had left. Its body was slimy, too slimy to be comforting, and Dream let it go a moment later. He thought about throwing it, yet then again, such a small, useless creature didn't deserve to waste his energy. That's what he kept telling himself anyway.

The strumming started off slow at first, rhythmic and mundane, before evolving into something truly beautiful. Notes danced through the air, wrapping around Dream's head in a sweetly addictive, musical parade. He sighed, content, closing his eyes once more.

"You play beautifully," he told the other, humming along to the music in a false key.

It was a simple ballad, one that was often sung in villages when spring came around again and the snow thawed into roaring tides. Everyone knew it, everyone remembered the tune, and yet the name was a mystery. That made it all the more peaceful. No one remembered the name because it didn't matter. There was no need to know a specific detail about something to be able to enjoy it.

A light and airy chuckle followed the music. "You can't really lose a talent once you gain it."

Dream shrugged, sinking beneath the water until his shoulders were covered. "I wouldn't know," he replied.

He was met by another chuckle. "Well that's a load of bollocks, isn't it? You've been locked in a prison for months and still know how to fight like the best of my soldiers."

"That's not as high a compliment as you might think."

"Oh, well we did end up beating you."

Dream couldn't help but smile a little, good and bad memories alike running through his mind. "I am still deeply salty about that," he let the other know.

"Don't be. You won the final battle, didn't you?"

Dream paused, fingers drumming under the surface of the water. Doomsday: not the proudest of his victories, but still one nonetheless. He nodded slowly. "Hm."

Silence fell once more between them, letting the music take control once again. Dream momentarily ducked beneath the water again, rising up with his hands combing through his long hair.

The water felt good, so good in fact. The discovery of the lake was a pure blessing, and the warrior wasn't afraid to admit that he had been spending ungodly amounts of time simply swimming around in it and walking through the waterfalls. Fully clothed or naked, it made no difference; it was simply so addicting to finally have all the water he wanted at the tips of his fingers. It was nothing like Pandora's Vault. Nothing at all like his holding cell.

I'm never going back.

A cacophony of shrill screeches filled the air above him, and he looked up. Against the pale sky, a myriad of jet-black swallows shot out from the rock faces, darting back and forth. Small birds with sharp eyes, sharp wings and even sharper voices, filling the sky with dizzying acrobatics.

What freedom they had. What freedom they all had, now. Dream felt just as liberated as them, confined to the ground and merely gazing wistfully up at them. Along with the gentle music and their cries, it created something so utterly beautiful.

The other spoke again. "Thinking is good, very good in fact." They shifted, and so did the music. "Depends on what you're thinking about, however."

"Smooth way to try and get information out of me," Dream teased, less and less transfixed by the birds as time went on.

"Oh, I'm not trying anything. I'm just curious what someone like you thinks about while he's half naked in a lake."

The sentence was blunt, yet so was the other. Oh, sharp in mind and body, that was for sure, but vocal and brash nonetheless.

Dream shrugged. "Just... things."

The prison, Sam, the bloodied trident now lying against one of the ruined stone walls of their camp, the fear, the freedom, the revenge, George. Just things.

"I get it," the other said.

"No you don't."

Dream could almost see them shrug. "Maybe I don't, but I am cursed with something called creativity. I can imagine it very well, thank you very much."

"You've always been a creative man. Too creative some might say."

Creativity, a blessing and a curse. With great power and ideas came great responsibility, and many squandered it completely. The other was one of them, although that didn't mean that what came of it wasn't a masterpiece that made even the mighty despair.

Another light chuckle. "A great weakness of mine, I must admit," the other tutted. "But as the great William Shakespeare once said: 'All the world's a stage.' We are merely actors in it, and I've embraced that role fully."

Dream didn't need to dig too far into it to find the undertone of what the other said. "You certainly do know how to go out with a bang," he said, smiling at his own, quite insensitive joke.

"A bang? You flatter me, really. It was always meant to be."

"Your Chekhov's gun."

"Exactly. I'm glad you remembered that."

"You were a great man back then," the warrior told them. "I don't think anyone will forget you so soon."

The music suddenly stopped. "And thanks to you, Dream, this time I'll be even greater."

Dream turned around. Sitting cross-legged on the grassy bank, the blue-stained guitar resting in his lap and his fingers lazily dragging along the strings, Wilbur Soot smiled. The shoulders of his new trench-coat were covered by a thick, deep blue fleece, washed and scraped clean of the animal that once wore it. He turned his head up to the birds above them, and the warrior watched as Wilbur began to sing along with them, wild and free.

Wild, free, and revived.

Chapter Fifty-Two: Free Falling

Alchemy never solved anything. It never claimed to, either. For crying out loud, it was only seriously developed to try and turn plain metal into pure gold!

That never happened, unfortunately, but on the way, the alchemists found Strength, Invisibility, Fire Resistance, and other useful drugs. It wasn't what they were aiming for, but they were prepared to take what they could get. Enhancing the biological capabilities of natural organisms instead of creating a metal they could easily just pull up from the mines or the Nether? Eh, good enough.

It was the Healing potions in particular that were being cooked up insanely fast within the walls of Techno's cabin. Brewing stands worked day and night for weeks and weeks on end, vials upon vials filling up with bright pink liquid made from a mix of sticky, golden-coated melons, milky-white ghastr tears and a bulbous herb grown only in the Nether, known as netherwart.

A couple of doses were easy to achieve when one knew what they were doing, but after a batch of eight, getting all the ingredients was growing expensive. And yet, Technoblade seemed to have infinite supplies at his disposition, or enough to bother wasting them on his "patient" anyway.

Sam couldn't move for the first two weeks after being laid down in what was soon known as "his" bed. The pain in his stomach was still too great, and every ounce of his strength had left him – it had all been used up fighting for his life as Carl's bumpy ride brought him to the tundra. He was immobilized, and helpless, reduced to only groaning in pain when touched or muffling shrieks as night terrors racked his brain.

Techno started taking care of him as soon as he arrived. A groggy-eyed Sam had felt him gently clean his injuries and stitch them up, before wrapping them in fresh bandages. Then, a vial of Healing was pressed to his lips, starting weeks of what would soon be a daily, heavy dosage of medicine.

The shifts after Techno's were divided between Sapnap and Ranboo, at least for a while. Eventually, the piglin had come to a decision that forcing the young hybrid to stand

guard over a gruesome spectacle like a sentinelle was too much, and so Ranboo only visited when someone else was in the room. He'd sit down and read out loud for as long as he felt like it.

From the tremors in his voice, Sam could hear that Ranboo had no idea whether the patient could hear him or not, but the fact he still came made his heart melt.

There would be a timid knock at the door, Techno or Sapnap would let him in, and a lanky shadow would pull up a chair by his head, fingers wrapped nervously around a journal.

"Hi Sam," he'd say in a quiet voice, almost as low as a prayer. "I've written something new today. I don't know if it's good, but I think you might like it."

Then, he'd begin.

Ranboo had started writing apparently. Writing what was the question; every piece would alternate between styles and genre. One day, he'd show off a haiku poem and the next an entire, five-act play. It was clear that the hybrid was new to the world of literature, refusing to choose a type and only catching his own mistakes as he read aloud, but by the gods he was talented nevertheless. Sam was often the first to hear his work, and he found that special. Incredibly special, and incredibly touching.

As for his two other, older and more serious caretakers, their shifts around his bedside were timed to the second. They rotated every five hours, after keeping a vigilant watch over him and forcing him to down a new vial of Healing every hour on the dot. No exceptions.

The wounds were deep, or so Techno had said. Too deep to simply be healed by one potion. Sam's injuries required serious and constant medical attention. The Healing helped, sure – every day, he felt just that bit more hopeful for a full recovery – but the dosages sometimes seemed extreme. He was certain that there were more ghast tears in his veins than blood now, and like a spin-off of King Midas, he'd be able to cure anyone by the mere, golden touch of his hands.

He couldn't complain, not that he would have ever wanted to. The potions were doing him an enormous amount of good, and poor Techno and Sapnap were tiring themselves to the bone, all for him.

Sapnap, the wonderful friend he had known so long ago, was perhaps one of the most panicked of the Commune's settlers. He'd sit ever so close to Sam, set on changing and

improving whatever he could even if nothing needed to be, and tried to fill their time together with jokes. Bad ones, granted, but ones that still tried to lighten the mood.

"Hey, what do you call a creeper who got run over by a minecart? Nothing, that's what, because you're going to live."

Sam often had the silent urge to question Sapnap: why was he in the Antarctic Commune in the first place? Wasn't he a part of Kinoko Kingdom? Of course, he didn't have the chance to, not until he was well enough to talk properly.

Technoblade on the other hand was a much more sullen watcher. He would sit close to Sam – just like Sapnap – with his elbows resting on the bed and his hands clasped together. Sometimes, he stared at Sam, eyes constantly filled with concern and neverending worry. Other times, he sat with his head down, eyes closed, and muzzle moving in a whisper. If Sam didn't know better, he'd think he was on his deathbed already. He never caught what Technoblade said, the jumbles of words barely reaching his ears. All he knew was that the piglin was beyond devoted. When he wasn't actively watching Sam, he was brewing up a new batch of potions or out collecting necessities for his eventual recovery.

Eventual. That was the word he had thrown about a lot recently. It was as if Technoblade was depending on him surviving. Depending, why? No clue.

But among all his less-than professional nurses and doctors, there was one sentinelle who was undoubtedly up there with all the rest. Fran – ever faithful, ever loyal to her best friend – stayed diligently by his side, seemingly never moving.

He didn't think about her surprising arrival too much, and instead appreciated that she was there. When his arm had enough energy to, he'd move it until it rested on top of her head. His dog would then rub against him with soft whimpers and a wagging tail. When she wasn't getting petted, she was sitting beside him, her head resting gently on the mattress and her large wet nose gently poking his arm.

Gods, he loved that beautiful, silver-pelted hound, and she loved him.

Philza, throughout everything, never showed his face.

His healing process was a long one. Days alone with an infected wound in a humid prison cell never did anyone any favours – but after a month, he managed to sit up in his bed. A week later he could move his arms freely and a couple of days after that, his legs were back in use for short periods of time, until his wound would cause him to

cramp up and retreat back to his bed. He was skeletal, and had only just started eating again, surviving on something other than mere potions acting as life support. His dosage of Healing was considerably reduced as time went on. One a day was sufficient when he began walking again.

Finally, two months after he was first brought in, Fran ran into the cabin from outside and leapt into her owner's arms. In front of Sapnap's shocked eyes, Sam held her up effortlessly with little to no stumble in his step, happily hoisting her up into a better position. That was the moment everyone realized that Sam was finally alright, and that he had survived his brutal attack.

He had *survived*.

Sam had never really liked the winter months. They were too cold, too depressing, and too desolate for his taste. He never thought he could adapt to a constant, frozen landscape, yet here he was, forming a new life in the tundra with a ragtag group of unlikely friends.

The Antarctic Commune was a surprisingly welcoming place, and that wasn't just because of Techno's little settlement. Just a little further past the mountain Ranboo's shack sat under was a quaint little town. When the newcomer to the tundra first found out about its existence, he was surprised. How did no one know of it?

The answer came soon after, when he began to make frequent visits with Technoblade. The townsfolk – clad in thick clothes of sky-blue wool and white, trimmed fur – were dependent on no one but themselves. They lived in dark wooden cabins with sloped roofs, lit up by silver lanterns and connected by icy stone roads. A society of hunters, gatherers and farmers who thrived on the frozen wasteland they were dropped into, with peaceful, rosy cheeks and fingertips that had never seen a single war in their entire lives. They had no need for idle gossip about the mainland, just as the mainland would have no need to know about them. They were happy, they were satisfied, and they were living in a snowy paradise of their own making.

"We promised to protect them," Techno told Sam. "And they trade with us. It's a mutual agreement."

"Reciprocity," Sam nodded.

Techno turned to him, a bundle of warm clothes in his arms and a few golden coins hovering over the weaver's hand. He smiled, paid, and draped the winter cloak around Sam's shoulders. "I knew you of all people would get it," he chuckled.

The new outfit he was given felt a little uptight and rigid at first.

"Don't worry," Sapnap said when Sam wore everything for the first time. "It feels nice after a while, and it's certainly preferable to freezing to death."

Everyone in the Commune wore similar attire, from the same material. It was thick and rough, but the snow demanded it. It was either that or freezing to death.

The amount of fur on Techno's cloak was considerably larger than everyone else's, and a blood-red sash tightly hugged his waist. The extra, hairy bulk around his neck made him look like a lion. A lion with slightly defective eyesight who needed glasses to read, but a lion nevertheless.

Phil's uniform not only had large holes cut out for his damaged wings, but he wore no cape. His wide-brimmed, striped hat fluttered on top of his head, speckled with frost and crow poo. It was perhaps less than flattering, but his golden hair and wide smile said otherwise.

Ranboo and Sapnap's clothes were the lightest out of all of them. The hybrid only wore a heavy winter cloak almost as thick as Techno's was, and the fireborn's natural body heat was doing him more favors than any woolen clothing ever could. If anything, he simply adhered to the others' outfits because he looked "downright snazzy" in them.

And then there was Sam, in the same light blue as the rest, standing as tall and proper as a general. His uniform went all the way up, tightening around his neck and fastened by two rows of silver buttons running down to his waist, a belt and scabbard strapped by his side. Long black boots with fur padding the inside ran up dark trousers, and a considerably shorter cape hung loosely over one of his shoulders. Only a crown and expensive jewelry would be needed to eventually liken him to royalty. His green highlights clashed against the blue and white like parasitic ivy; out of place, but beautiful nevertheless.

When he looked in the mirror for the first time in ages, he almost didn't recognize himself. He held his head high and puffed out his chest, taking himself in like a breath of fresh air. Sapnap was right; he would need a little time to get used to it, but he was certain that wouldn't be a problem. In fact, he felt a lot more free than he had ever been before.

The gas mask he wore had been graciously retrieved by Ranboo as they left the Vault that fateful day a while ago now, but it was no longer needed. Sam vowed that he would never wear it again, and that was definitely for the best.

He also let his hair grow out; not too much, but not too little either. Just enough so it curled over his shoulders, and so Ranboo could lightly braid it if he ever felt like doing so. That happened surprisingly often.

"Techno doesn't let me do his fur anymore," the hybrid sighed in one of those sessions. He sat crossed legged on a perch behind Sam, his fingers moving quickly.

"Really, how come?" Sam blew a stray lock out of his face.

"He says I yank too much, which is ridiculous."

Sam smirked as his head was jerked backwards, not having the heart to tell Ranboo that Techno was right.

Once Sam was strong enough to live life to the fullest again, every day was filled to the brim. He joined the hunting parties sent out to chase the herds of wild caribou, whizzing over the icy ground on top of dog-drawn sleighs. He offered redstone knowledge to the nearby town as well, he perfected his fighting skills, and he spent time with people he missed.

Ranboo, Sapnap and Techno. Their time together was wonderful.

"You've definitely improved," the piglin snorted one day, skidding backwards on the training ground.

Sam caught his balance once again, sword aloft. "A few years change a lot," he agreed, charging again.

Techno swung his axe sideways, knocking the blade out of Sam's hand. He chuckled. "Your grip hasn't improved," he teased.

Sam playfully punched him, and Techno locked his head under his arm, ruffling his hair with a roar of laughter. Sam groaned and tried to push him off, warm breaths escaping his smiling lips and curling into the bitter air.

Technoblade: a battle-hardened piglin with a good heart, wanted in two thirds of the known realms. Sam was proud to know him, and even prouder when Techno called him "brother". That was the mark of remaining in the Commune's good graces, and he had earned it.

Sam hadn't handled a proper sword in a long time, too attached to his trident and the skills needed that came with fighting with it. Having to reprogram years of practice in

merely a week was a lot, but ultimately satisfying. Technoblade was a good teacher, no matter how much Ranboo complained about his sore muscles afterwards. Sam still wasn't as proficient as he would have liked with a flat blade – Techno was still able to defeat him without too much of a fight – but that didn't matter in the end, as he was soon given a gift.

"I had the blacksmith make it for you," Techno smiled when Sam first held the weapon. "I know it will never replace your own, but it still does the job."

Sam thanked him profusely. If anything, he largely preferred this one: his new trident was a shiny shade of gold, and ridiculously lighter than the one he used to own. That said, it was far from weak and when he shot it into a nearby, rocky wall, the mountain almost split in half. The trident itself remained intact. It was worthy of the great Poseidon himself.

Sam preferred it, sure, but it took a while until he finally decided to start using that type of weapon again. The three sharp prongs were a constant reminder of his fall, and his crusted scars burned at the memory. It took a sudden burst of courage to bring it out to a training session. When he did, the grins from Sapnap and Techno were all he needed to force himself to forget. Why dwell on the past when he could live in the moment?

And yet, the past was never far behind him.

The news of his recovery was soon sent off in the clutches of a mangy crow, who braved the snowstorms to deliver it to its destination. Not even a day later, someone turned up at the door of Techno's cabin, shivering against the weather and almost tripping over her own hooves in her excitement.

The rap against the door followed a moment later. Techno got up from his seat in front of the fire, where he and Sam had been sprawled out in chairs with their feet up – reading and tinkering with a clock, respectively.

The piglin looked out of the window, then looked back at Sam. He said that there was someone here to see him. Confused, the man watched as the door was opened. The newcomer came in, lowering the hood of her cloak. As soon as she saw him, she froze, eyes sparkling. Sam stayed put as well too. He stared in shock, and then he ran straight into Puffy's arms. After months of absence, Sam had forgotten how wonderful the small sheep's cuddles were, and how light she was as he picked her up and spun her around, laughing.

"I thought you had forgotten about me," the captain whispered, pressed once more against him.

Under Technoblade's watchful eyes, he kissed her forehead. "How could I ever?" he sighed, a fond look between them lingering for a moment longer than it perhaps should have.

The tundra may have been bitterly cold and mostly empty, able to freeze any poor soul to death and beyond, but it was still one of the warmest places Sam had ever had the honour of living in.

"What's it like on the mainland?" Sam asked.

Puffy gave him a look, and a smile. "Why would you want to know? You're doing too well for yourself here!"

The "here" in question was clearly the tundra as a whole, but them climbing up a rugged mountain track worked too. Sam, now used to the rough terrain, was practically skipping ahead like a skilled mountain goat, compared to Puffy who was struggling just that bit more. He helped her when she needed it, yet still kept at a certain distance. Stubborn Captain Puffy "could manage very well on her own, thank you very much", or so she repeated every so often.

Sam shrugged. "I'm just curious," he replied. "The tundra's quiet, too quiet sometimes. Tell me about the mainland." He pouted as she was about to reprimand him again. "Please?"

She shook her head with a laugh at his exasperating demands, and sighed. "Everything feels dead," she said as he helped her up a slippery slope. "Since Dream escaped, everyone's on edge. The only people on the streets are the patrols sent out to try and find him. They always come back empty handed."

"The Egg must be loving it," Sam muttered under his breath, bitter.

"That's the thing," Puffy said, taking a step in front of him. He turned to her, glimpsing the pure confusion on her face. "The tendrils are retreating."

Sam's eyebrows darted down as he tried to comprehend what he had just been told. "They're... retreating?"

"Getting sucked back into their source, maybe?" She shrugged, visibly disturbed. "I don't know. They just stopped growing one day, and the next they started disappearing."

"That's strange..." He thought for a moment. "Could it be dying?"

Puffy opened her mouth – most likely to answer him – but closed it with a smile. "Stop thinking about it," she said to him. "You have a new life here, focus on that instead of everything else."

"I can't," he confessed, scrabbling up an icy boulder. "I can't just leave everything I've ever known in the past."

He'd done it before, but that wasn't the point. Back then, he had a reason. He didn't now. He pulled her up the rock, steadying her against him when the heel of her boot slipped against the smooth, wet surface. They were almost at the peak now; a couple more minutes would finally get them there.

"But you should try," the captain continued, gazing at him with sympathetic eyes. "You'll rest easier."

He somehow doubted that. "Let me ask one more question!" Sam grabbed her hand just before she took another step, the inquiry burning within him ever since he first regained his senses. "What about Tommy? Is he alright?"

It was perhaps a mistake to ask. Puffy looked down, biting her lip and falling silent. Her falter affected Sam too, and he dropped his arm.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"No, don't be sorry!" She reached up and cupped his face between her soft, gloved hands. "I would tell you if I knew, but no one's seen Tommy since the siege on the prison."

Sam softly placed his hand over hers, pressing it harder to his cheek. "I'm worried about him," he mumbled, closing his eyes.

Even through her gloves, her touch was warm, and he missed it. He missed *her*. He missed everyone who wasn't with him in the tundra right then; his friends, his "family", even those who were merely kind to him. He had changed a lot, but that love hadn't. That love and affection hadn't even wavered.

The Sam that had been reborn in the Commune wasn't the Sam of Pandora's Vault, of the Badlands or any of the other high, corrupted positions he had held. He was the Sam of redstone ores, genuine love and the golden barley fields rimming the desert. He wondered if he and Puffy could go back there one day.

Puffy stroked his cheek again. "I'm worried too, but if Tommy can't be found, it's because he doesn't want to be. We've got to accept and respect his wishes. The gods know that the poor kid needs *someone* to at some point..."

They continued their trek through the snow and the jagged rocks, slipping and sliding and trying to stay upright. They eventually ended up locking arms with each other and holding on to the ridges they could reach. Their mutual concern for the blond, troublemaking boy faded into jests and breathless laughs. They weren't trying to erase the boy from their minds; they were simply doing what they had both agreed on. Tommy didn't want to be found, therefore they wouldn't look for him, even in their own wishful thinking.

Sam instead focused on the fact that he was happy. *He was happy.*

Finally, after a long hike up the risky trail, they touched the heavens. The quiet was deafening, and even the wind had become no more than a mere murmur. Under a light pink sky, the snowflakes fell so slowly that they almost hung in perfect, immobile suspension, the shimmering, magical pixies of the tundra biome. They couldn't see over the edge of the mountain, the ground carpeted by fluffy white mist, but that didn't matter. The peak's own, little bubble of few colours and sweet softness was magical enough to leave them speechless. They were just slightly higher than a few, wispy clouds and although the view was breathtaking, so was the lack of oxygen.

"Wow, this is..." Puffy clearly didn't even have any words, enchanted by the light, pastel world around them. "Sam, it's beautiful!"

All he did was give her a smile in return, and watched her as she slipped off one of her gloves. Snowflakes drifted onto her palm, leaving glistening spots against her fingers and gracing the darker parts of her fleece and eyelashes. A rosy blush from the cold spread across her cheeks and over her nose, contrasting against her pale skin. Bright blue eyes sparkled against it all like heart-of-the-seas, a pair of shimmering diamonds glittering on a pastel pink and icing-white seabed.

It took a couple of minutes for Sam to finally drag his own gaze away. He turned around with a cough, the frozen air slipping down his throat. Stepping carefully, he made his

way to the edge. The clouds were so thick, he was tempted to take a step off the stone and walk through the air.

"What are we doing up here?" Puffy asked him, trotting over. "It's beautiful, it really is, but..."

"But?"

"But it's very unlike you to take someone somewhere for no particular reason."

Sam had to admit that she was right, and as he crossed her gaze, he saw a brief flash of an emotion he wasn't accustomed to. Expectation, or at least a hint of it. He didn't linger on it. He *couldn't* linger on it. He quickly cleared his thoughts, and took her hand in his. Hers was considerably smaller. He had forgotten how much he missed that.

"Oh, there's a reason alright," he promised her, heading for the thinnest point on the entire summit. It stretched out over a sea of white, the nature of the world underneath a mere mystery.

She played along, keeping up with him as he led her along the rock. "Really," she smirked. "What is it, then?"

Sam removed a turquoise orb from his pocket and after carefully calculating, he threw it. It arched over the clouds, disappearing from view.

As soon as he did, he turned back to her, and grabbed her other hand. "Do you trust me?" he asked her, his tone soft and as honey-sweet as he could make it.

Puffy raised an eyebrow, puzzled. "Yes?"

"Good." He smiled, and began to teeter backwards over the edge.

Her grip on his hands tightened then rushed to grab his forearms, and her hooves dug into the snow. "Sam? What are you—" She was cut off as she was dragged after him, losing her fragile footing and skidding against the snow. "SAM!"

The fall that followed was exhilarating. They burst through the cloudline, snowflakes tumbled as their bodies were, the white wind slicing at them. The whistles that the peak had lacked were back, as ear-piercing as ever. The fresh air drove Sam wild, and he had never felt so alive. He whooped in delight, his cry echoing across the landscape along with the horrified screams of his companion. They only made him rejoice louder. Clearly, he was enjoying it much more than Puffy was, her eyes tightly shut and her fingers

digging painfully into his biceps. She kept shrieking with intelligible sounds and obscenities alike. As much as the sight amused him, Sam made sure to hold on tightly to her, attempting to reassure her as the ground drew closer and closer.

Freedom, oh gods, freedom!

Where had it been all those years, when he needed it most? Where had it been when the Vault was his only beloved? Why had it dared show its face now, after he was dragged through hell and back? And the audacity! The audacity it had to feel so unbelievably wonderful! He would never tire of it.

Suddenly, they were tugged sideways and a moment later, his back hit something soft and frozen. He sank down, his cape twisting under him and his blue uniform slowly soaking itself to a darker shade. Something heavy landed on top of him, heart pounding and breathing quickly with wide, terrified eyes. Behind her, the mountain peak they had fallen from was no more than a dark shadow on the horizon, and a cluster of wooden cabins glowed a bright gold not too far from where they lay. The remains of the enderpearl pressed into Sam's spine like broken glass, the particles rising slowly from where it had landed.

"Sapnap taught me how to do that," he said when he had caught his breath, then burst out laughing.

He threw his head back into the snow, the cold touch making him light-headed. He laughed even louder when a pair of balled up fists angrily thumped him in the chest.

"You idiot!" Puffy cried, her terror still smeared across her face. Her curly hair was sticking up all over the place and glued to her cheeks. "You could have killed us!"

Sam smirked. "But I didn't," he pointed out, earning himself a painful slap that spread warmth all across his cheek.

The captain raised herself above him and held a hand to her heart, before collapsing back down onto him and muttering something intelligible into his shoulder. He sighed and gave her a gentle pat on her back.

"I'm sorry," he said, not remorseful in the slightest.

She seemed to know that, but still insisted on staying where she was. "Taking me up a mountain for *that*... Holy heck..."

"You said you trusted me," Sam pointed out, amused, before the realization hit him. "Why? I thought there was—"

"—no trust between us anymore?" Puffy shuffled, tilting her head to the side. They were at eye-level now, something that they rarely had the chance to experience.

"Exactly," he replied, slowly sinking below the surface of the two perfect pools of blue.

She headbutted him lightly and dragged him out of it, their foreheads touching for a moment. "We'll have that conversation at some point," she said. "But only when we're both ready."

"Alright," he agreed as she moved again, right before wincing with a hiss and gently pushing her off. "Knee, pain," he wheezed, making Puffy move immediately and roll over on her back.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, raising herself a little. "Does it still hurt?"

Sam brushed his hand over his lower abdomen, feeling the thin layer of bandages underneath his clothes. He shrugged. "Sometimes," he admitted, "but it's getting better. Just try not to impale me again please."

The captain sighed and let out a small, relieved laugh. "Noted," she replied, lying back down beside him. "I've missed you more than I can say. For days and nights, I kept wondering if you were still alive. "

"Well, I am, aren't I?" He forced himself to laugh a little, if only to lighten the mood.

"Techno didn't send the messages he promised to."

"He was working his ass off just to keep me alive. You can't blame him for being too preoccupied."

"I was worried," she said, huddling back down in the snow beside him. "I *am* worried, and I always will be. You mean too much to me."

You mean too much to me.

He would be lying if he said that didn't make his stomach flutter.

Sam stared upwards, his body still itching with adrenaline. The sky was blue, without a single cloud in sight, and the few snowflakes that fell were light and tickled his face. The

breeze was stiff but enjoyable, carding through his hair and his eyelashes. Beside him, Puffy shifted and hugged his arm, providing all the warmth he really needed. The tundra was silent, save for two, shaken hearts and the distant banging of a piglin chopping up some firewood.

So, this is what peace felt like.

"Don't look around," the captain suddenly whispered into his ear. "We're being watched."

Too lazy to get up, Sam arched his back and tilted his head backwards until he could glimpse the upside-down silhouette of a winged man, staring at them from across the snow. Bent over a makeshift table settled on trestles, he held the dismembered carcass of a hare in his hand and a knife in the other. Even from afar, his piercing blue stare was visible, and Sam clenched his jaw. They stared at each other for a while longer, before Philza turned back to skinning the rabbit and hanging it with all the other cuts.

"I feel like he wants to plunge that knife right into my gut sometimes," Sam mumbled. "Follow Dream's example or something."

Puffy gave him a squeeze. "Nonsense," she tutted. "You're just making things up."

For some reason, Sam doubted he was.

As evening rolled around, Captain Puffy took her leave, denying Sam's request for her to stay a little longer.

"Tubbo wants me to spend some time with him," she said as she gave him a goodbye hug.

"And what about me? Who's more important?"

She swiped at him again. "My son is, you idiot!" she laughed.

Sam stopped insisting after a while, bidding her a safe journey back and promising to warn her the next time he was planning to drag them off a cliff.

A little later, as usual, dinner was held in Technoblade's home, where the space was cleared – Sam's bed pushed away and a few weapons stored into whatever chests could be found – and the table was set up. Sam helped Sapnap light the fire by carrying in heavy armfuls of logs, then welcomed Nikki when she unexpectedly knocked at the door.

With a basket of delicious-smelling cookies under her arm and a sweet smile on her face, Sam found it surprising that she had somehow formed a friendship with Techno's battle-hardened, anarchist crew. She seemed to get on with all of them, including Sapnap... well, maybe not entirely.

"Well look what the creeper dragged in," the fireborn scoffed when Sam made the girl's presence known.

"Still haven't frozen to death, lava boy?" Nikki teased, setting down her basket and shooting him a sharp stare. "That's a shame."

"Fuck you."

"Language," Techno muttered, clambering out of his basement with a roast between his hands. "I didn't invite her here for you to rip out each other's throats."

"Why not? This could be entertaining," Sam hummed as he took the platter from the piglin's hands and set it down.

"Don't worry, Tech," Sapnap chuckled. "Nikki knows I'm only joking."

He flipped her off and stuck out his tongue. Nikki rolled her eyes, but Sam could distinctly see a smile spread across her face.

The rest of the evening was spent in good company, Sam taking his place at the table between Sapnap and Ranboo. Techno sat opposite them, beside Philza and Nikki. Gods, before he came to the Commune, the last time he had seen Sapnap was many months ago.

"It's good to see you again, my friend," he smiled for the hundredth time that past week alone.

The fireborn gave him a gentle nudge. "I'm glad to see you too."

It appeared that they were both just as content as each other. That didn't mean the dark shadows had cleared: Sam still had a couple of his, and there was one hanging over Sapnap as well, probably due to his exiled state. He couldn't know for sure, and he knew it wasn't his place to ask.

He didn't have too much time to think about it, as Techno suddenly invited Ranboo to get up in front of the class and show them what he had learned today. That resulted in a nervous hybrid meekly trying to tackle Sam in front of the dinner table. It was a soft and

and playful fight, but one unintentional punch to the gut was enough to send him doubling over in pain.

"I'm fine, really," Sam laughed when Ranboo, mortified beyond belief, tried to apologize. "Good hit! You're getting stronger."

That said, Sam was noticeably calmer for the rest of the evening and didn't have the stomach to eat anything else, not even Nikki's delicious-smelling pastries. She kept some aside for him. Even when dinner was done and everything was cleared away, he didn't follow the others down into the snow. He stayed on the deck between the two cabins, and watched as Technoblade set up his crossbow on the ground, loaded it with fireworks, and had Sapnap do the honours of lighting them.

Fuses rocketed up into the night sky, exploding with colour and shimmering powder against the stars. Every bang was followed by a cheer from all present. Nikki and Ranboo scampered around and laughed, trying to catch the falling stardust in their hands, and Sapnap and Techno loaded the next fireworks. Sam watched from afar as the tundra was painted with colours even he had never seen so vibrantly before. A true spectacle.

"Techno has a special flair," a voice behind him suddenly interjected.

Sam froze, but didn't dare turn around. There were footsteps, a gentle rustling of fabric as some snow was brushed off a section of the balustrade, and the tips of dark black feathers brushed his side.

"A flair for a lot of things, like art," Philza continued, gesturing up at the smoke-filled sky above them.

Sam shuffled away ever so slightly, and stared down at the others. He desperately tried to catch one of their gazes and silently begged them to save him from his current situation. They didn't even glance his way.

Shit.

"Uh, yeah. A lot of things..." He cleared his throat, trying to banish the grumble that plagued his voice.

"Including trustworthy people."

Sam cast him a sideways glance. Phil wasn't looking at him, focused too deliberately on the far away mountain peaks, but the thin purse of his lips spoke volumes.

"You think I'm trustworthy?" Sam couldn't help but ask him.

Phil shrugged. "Well, Techno thinks you are, Sam," he said, the man's name coming out dry and sour. "So I have to, don't I?"

"I mean... You don't have to if you don't want to. I would understand completely if you don't."

Why was he acting so nervous? He was so much taller than Phil, and could crush him without much effort, wringing his neck like a chicken's. He wouldn't, of course, but the point was that he *could*. He shouldn't be so anxious.

"No," Phil replied. "I have to, because what is a community without trust, especially in this corner of the universe? Techno trusts you, and so must I."

Sam blinked, certain that there was something more behind Philza's resignation. "You don't seem happy about it," he noted.

That seemed to have destabilized the avian a little bit, as he leaned on the fence and shrugged. "I just don't know what to think," he finally replied. "He met you *once*."

"I saved his life."

"And so did I, multiple times. That doesn't make you special."

Sam was taken aback, and furrowed his brow. Special? Why would that make him special? What was Phil on about?

"I know it doesn't," he answered, still just as confused.

"Well you certainly act like it does!" Sam ducked out of the way as Phil's tattered wings suddenly shot up, feathers ruffling with fury. The avian's hands gripped the wood with such a force that it looked like he was about to snap it, and his own fingers too. "First you've taken my son, and now you've got your sights set on my best friend!"

"What? I'm not trying to—" *Wait*. "Your son?"

Another couple of fireworks went off, whistling and booming. Techno, Sapnap, Ranboo and Nikki cheered once again.

Phil's reply was as cold as the iced landscape around them. "My son," he said.

Sam couldn't help but reply in the same tone. Two could play at that game. "He has a name you know," he muttered.

"Tommy."

A deafening silence followed his name. Below them, Technoblade rushed off to a nearby shack to retrieve another box of fireworks while the others engaged in a playful snowball fight. How Sam wished he could be down there with them right now, but the revelation was too important to ignore.

Everything began to make sense. Phil's hostility towards him was due to one thing, and one thing alone. One, young boy.

"Is... Is this what all this is about?" Sam tentatively asked. "Tommy?"

This time, Philza wasn't even looking at him. He stayed completely still, muscles visibly clenched in every part of his body; a statue of ice, feathers, and spite.

"I never wanted to take him from you, Phil," Sam assured him. "I just wanted to give him a life."

"A life you didn't think he could have with me." Philza raised a sleeve to his eyes and wiped away a mix of tears and melted snowflakes. "Tommy is closer to you than he ever was to me. That day, the funeral... It meant nothing to me. I've been mourning Tommy's loss ever since he first stepped out of our home, when he and Tubbo ran off to join Wilbur in L'Manberg. He never truly needed me. He found you instead."

The funeral.

It seemed so long ago now, but that day was still freshly engraved into his mind. Sam remembered Philza's reaction, the way he came up to them, smiling and oblivious to the tomb laid before them all. Sam remembered his own outburst afterwards too well, and the way his entire being hated that man. His rage was enough to burn entire worlds into nothing more than ash. Now he knew Philza felt the same. What a laughable pair they both made, torn by a mutual hate of each other and linked by the young boy bearing a confidence too great for him.

And then there was...

Son?

"Tommy's your son?"

That was... That was something Sam hadn't heard before. He knew Tommy used to regard Phil as a father, but... Sam had always thought that was just a superficial bond, not one weaved in blood.

Philza paused. "Not really. I found him in the ruins of a pillaged town as a baby, swaddled and lying in the remains of a church. Poor little boy, no one was left to take care of him, so I did. I promised him there and then, in the ruins of a steeple as the bells shook on their hinges."

The scene was heartbreaking to even think about. Tommy, a boy who seemed to have been born in the ashes of destruction and strife, under the deafening tocsin only rivaled by his own wails. It was hard to ever picture Tommy with a life outside of chaos. He was molded by it, and would be for the rest of his life. There was no changing that no matter how hard Sam – or Philza, apparently – had tried.

"He called for you," Sam suddenly said. He waited until he could feel the avian's eyes on him before continuing. "That day he was locked in the prison, he yelled for you."

"Did he?"

Sam couldn't make out Phil's attitude. He nodded slowly. "He did. He wanted you there, Phil. He was scared and he called for you."

The ice melted, at least a little. The statue moved again, shifting on his feet and lowering his wings. "Well, that's something he hasn't done in a long time," he chuckled dryly. The remorse was there. Sam knew enough about guilt to know what it sounded like when spoken.

"Well, he did and..." He hesitated before going on, not sure how what he was going to say next would make him look like in Philza's eyes. "It broke my heart. He called for me multiple times, because I was the warden and whatnot but..." He faltered again, running his hands through his now longer hair. He hadn't done that in ages. "That single cry of your name, that was real. That was when I realized he was terrified beyond belief. That's when I realized I'd always be walking in your shadow, no matter how hard I tried to banish it."

There, he said it. It had never felt so good to get it out, but so dreadful to wait for a reply. What was Philza going to say? Was he going to rub it in his face? Was he going to yell at him for being so selfish? Was he—

Philza laughed.

It wasn't sarcastic, nor dry and flavourless as it had previously been. He just *laughed*. "Relax, mate," he said. "You make me sound like a bloody god or something!"

Mate.

Sam turned to the avian. Phil was still seemingly on edge, but a thin smile had begun to break through.

Sam risked a small chuckle of his own. "You know what I mean," he mumbled.

"Yeah, I do." Philza looked back out across the landscape. "I guess we can just both agree that no matter what we think, Tommy's mindset is a mystery."

Sam sighed. The avian made it sound so simple. "Yeah, I guess it is..."

For a while, they watched in silence as their tundra companions set off a few more fireworks, this time having set up another crossbow and having a competition about who could shoot the most rockets in a minute. For a good while after that, the sky was a burning mass of colour, dazzling the onlookers who shielded their eyes and coughed through the smoke.

Phil – Sam had noticed – had become a lot more relaxed, taking off his hand to waft the smog out of their faces and letting his golden hair blow in the wind. In contrast, Sam couldn't help but tense up, standing up straight and bracing himself for the harsh impact of more verbal attacks. They never came.

"You know what's funny?" Philza suddenly said. He brushed some dried crow poo off his hat. "Tommy always knew he was an orphan. Wilbur let it slip during an argument, so he came up to me and demanded an explanation. I told him the truth, how could I not? But instead of crying about it, he listened and puffed up his little chest, before telling me that was the best thing he ever heard."

"The best thing?" Sam frowned.

How could being alone and abandoned be good in any way, least of all the "best thing" to ever happen to a kid? Then again, Phil seemed to have the answer to everything.

"His reasoning was that everything he did, he did it with no help from anyone, least of all from any parents. If he could do so much as build a treehouse on his own – him, the orphan – then imagine what other great things he could achieve!"

That sounded like Tommy alright. "Independence, huh?"

Phil's face fell, and he sighed. "Too early," he whispered. "Way too early. At the age of three, kids should wake up their parents in the middle of the night because of the monster under the bed, not create elaborate plans to slay said-monster in seven-hundred ways with only a soft pillow as a weapon."

Sam couldn't help but crack a grin. "Maybe I should ask him about those several hundred ways," he said. "They could come in handy someday."

"Tommy thinks you're dead, mate, remember?"

"Oh, right."

Sam drummed his fingers on his elbow, nervously trying to banish the heartbreaking thoughts in his head, to no avail. *I'm sorry, Tommy. Not yet.*

"It was terrifying how fast he grew up, and Tubbo too." Philza had started talking again.

Sam turned his attention back to the conversation at hand. "Do... do you know about Tubbo's—" he said, before being cut off.

"Parents? Not at first. I knew someone was watching me when I found him, but it never really clicked until I saw them with my own eyes. I think me and Puffy should have a talk sometime."

There was nothing malicious in his tone; if anything, it was affectionate.

Relieved, Sam nodded. "I think she'd like that," he told the avian.

"It's not a question of if she'd like it or not, but rather a necessity. I'm not worried though; it's clear that she's a mother that would go above and beyond for her lamb."

Sam smiled. He wholeheartedly agreed. It was strange to see how far he and Puffy had come as friends. When she first began seeking his company, after he saved her from a watery, final grave, he never thought she'd end up being a caring, devoted parent who went through too much devastation. He had always seen her as the fearless and brilliant Captain Puffy, who just happened to have a soft spot for kids. How times had changed since those far, far away days...

"When you love someone, you'd do anything for them," Sam said out loud, mind still consumed.

"Anything," Phil echoed. He looked lost, once again.

Sam leaned towards him, taking note of his strange behaviour. "Phil?" he called, somehow making his voice even more distant than it probably was in the avian's own ears. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, mate, I'm..." He sighed. "I'm fine. It's just hard when the thing you have to do for them can be... tragic."

"Tragic?"

"I killed my own son. I killed Wilbur. It was for the best but how can I ever forgive myself for that?"

Wilbur. His sympathy for Phil only grew, and he placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I forgot," he said.

Philza scoffed sarcastically. "I wish I could too. The blood just never leaves your hands. It tarnishes, it stains, it..." He broke off bringing his hands up to his eyes. "Oh gods, Sam! I killed him!"

Everything that had been piling up had finally boiled over, and Philza cracked. Sam didn't know what to do. His first reaction was to bring him into his arms and let him cry, but something told him that doing so wouldn't amount to anything. Philza – until maybe a few minutes ago – hated him. There was no use making anything worse, so he simply stood there with his hand on the other's shoulder, just close enough to act as some sort of comforting presence.

"Wilbur had given so much, and had so much left to give, and I—"

"Phil, it's alright. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"But I have to," the avian protested. "It's the only way I can still keep him here! L'Manberg's gone, Ghostbur's a shell, and..." He choked. "I can't believe you're seeing me like this."

Sam couldn't believe it either. He said nothing.

The avian sniffed. "Don't tell Techno."

"I won't."

"I don't want to keep dragging up the past, especially with him. He's the best friend I could ever ask for and a talented warrior, but sometimes his lifestyle and history is too much, even for me."

Sam could sort of see why. "Well, he's not exactly a peaceful guy, is he?"

That made Phil laugh a little, and he wiped his eyes again. "Did you know that he loves opera?"

Sam shook his head, suppressing a grin. "You're joking," he scoffed.

Phil shrugged with a coy smile. His eyes were still wet, but he appeared to be pushing through nonetheless. "He's got an entire box of records stashed away somewhere, and you can hear him over the mountains when he thinks that we're far enough away." He winked. "Don't tell him I said that, though."

Sam mimicked locking his mouth shut and throwing away the key. "Not a word," he agreed, privately making a note to catch Techno in the act someday.

Philza inhaled the cold tundra air, his cheeks glistening. The humorous parentheses had lasted only for a moment, and it seemed that he was locked back in his grief. Sam also faltered, waiting attentively.

"Techno would do anything for Wilbur," the avian said. "Everyone soon found that out on the 16th. He was hit just as hard when he died."

"Wilbur was very lucky to have such caring friends and family like you."

"We went far for him, and he went far for us. Sometimes, a little too far, especially for Tommy."

"How could someone go too far for someone they love?" Sam asked, immediately realizing that he held the answer already.

Rather, the answer for himself and his own case, but not for Wilbur. How far did Phil's son go? Further than blowing up an entire nation?

"It's very easy," Philza said to him. "Too easy, in fact. The furthest Wilbur ever went for Tommy was when they were both younger. Tommy was about six, and Wilbur was in his twenties. It happened a few years before the L'Manberg revolution, and Wilbur already had a life away from us that we didn't know about. He had a son only just older than Tommy was, a lover, and a home he was starting to build, but he kept us all in the dark."

He always came home every night, and we never knew something was up. Anyway, younger kids are always jealous of their siblings, and Tommy was no different."

Sam didn't have the heart to interrupt Phil, although he had so many questions. A son: Fundy, most likely. But a double life? How did no one notice anything?

Philza went on. "Wilbur used to have wings like me."

Wings! Wilbur Soot, with wings! As magnificent as his father's, perhaps? Dark and black? Sam never thought he could have a scarier image of Wilbur in his mind than the crazed madman everyone feared, until now. A young Angel of Death and Destruction wasn't something he particularly wanted to imagine, especially one so close to Tommy. Hovering beside him, whispering threats and empty praises into his ears. It was enough to make a chill run up his spine.

"He would use them whenever he could, even if it was just to get something off a high shelf. Those wings were Wilbur's whole world! They were his prized possession, and Tommy was jealous." Philza paused. "Scared would perhaps be a more accurate term. He was scared that Wilbur would fly away one day and abandon him. They were both swallows, with a thirst for adventure and who both wanted to touch the skies. The only difference was that one of them had wings, and the other still didn't know how to comb his own hair."

Sam laughed. "He still doesn't."

Phil also chuckled. "Scruffy as ever, of course. Wilbur knew Tommy was scared, and he knew Tommy wanted to be like him, but never could. So do you know what he did? If Tommy couldn't be like him, then he'd be like Tommy. He cut off his own wings. I came home one day, and the floor was covered in blood. Wilbur had sliced off his own wings with an axe, and had burned both them and the stubs on his back. I found him sitting in a corner, cuddling Tommy and whispering. Whispering words that I will never forget: *"I can never leave you now, Tommy. I will never leave you. We are going to be together forever, I promise."* That's how far Wilbur went for his brother."

Sam could vividly picture the scene right there and then: a younger Wilbur, perhaps with a cleaner complexion, coddling a small blond boy in big, strong arms even as rivers of blood ran down his spine. Wet eyes locked with each other and through it all, Wilbur smiled so brightly. Tommy stayed silent, simply wanting to melt into the man he called his brother. Vows of loyalty ran between them, childish and imaginary without even thinking of the years to come.

Sam's stomach flipped and ached, this time from something other than Ranboo's misplaced punch.

"I'd go to the end of the universe for Tommy," he told Phil. He was just as ready as Wilbur was to shackle himself down to the ground with the young boy.

"That makes two of us." Philza looked at him. "I guess only one of us acted on it, though, and that was you."

Sam shifted, uncomfortable. "I guess."

"How easy is it to watch a child march head-on into things he can't even begin to understand?" Phil asked in a low voice, clearly more to himself than anything.

Sam replied anyway. "I know what it's like to be forced into something as a kid, and not be able to do anything about it."

That wasn't entirely true; he did manage to do something about it, but it cost him everything. Not that he would have ever gone back on his decision either way.

"I can't hate you Sam," Philza suddenly said. "No matter how much I think I want to, I can't."

"The same goes for you too," Sam replied, a warm feeling spreading through him. "I can't hate you either."

"Let's just agree that the only one who hates us both right now is Tommy."

Phil held out his hand. That was a shallow joke that definitely hurt both of them, but it was a joke nonetheless. Sam held out his hand too, and they shook on it with a smile and a laugh.

Philza's hand was abnormally warm for the night-time temperature, and his skin was surprisingly soft. Legends said that Phil was older than most, and yet his body begged to differ. In fact, the only scars he could see were the two, dark black shreds rising from his back.

Wings. Such beautiful, complicated things, and seeing them in shambles was an abhorrent sight. The free-fall trick with the enderpearl certainly got Sam's heart pumping, but clearly nothing could ever compare to imagining the thrill of soaring through the open skies and riding the clouds, as some had the chance to experience. Without his wings, Philza was nothing but a broken bird confined to the ground.

Sam wouldn't wish that on anyone, and that is what pushed him to speak the words he said next.

"I want to help you fly again."

Chapter Fifty-Three: Daedalus

I want to help you fly again.

It was such a simple sentence, but such a difficult thing to achieve. Sam didn't really know what he was getting into when he said that.

Even Philza seemed surprised, and somewhat skeptical. "You're pulling my leg, right?"

It was too late to back down now. "No, I'm serious."

Phil stretched his large black wings out, and stared at them each in turn. "I don't know, mate... They seem pretty busted to me."

Nevertheless, he eventually caved in, and agreed to try. Sam was a brilliant engineer, but making working prosthetics for an avian was something he had never done before, and it was clear that he couldn't achieve it with the "primitive" mechanics at his disposal in the Antarctic Commune.

So a couple of dawns later, he and Philza packed up a few belongings, and travelled to Sam's mountain home. Realizing that their sudden disappearance would probe many questions, and even more so if they just left a letter, they made the bad decision to wake up a grumpy Sapnap and tell him themselves.

"What is this, a fire drill?" he yawned as he was shaken awake. With his eyes still closed, he held up his arms. "See? Gloves haven't moved, 's not me. Give me five more minutes..."

"We're going in five minutes," Phil told him, sharing an amused look with Sam.

"Going where?" Sapnap grumbled, still half asleep.

"On a trip for a few days, me and Sam."

"Hmph," the fireborn huffed, retreating once more beneath his quilt. "Fine. Bring me back a souvenir."

It hadn't gone exactly as they had planned, but it worked either way. Once they had left their friend back in his perfect little dreamland, they left the Antarctic Commune, and headed in a different direction entirely.

Long black cloaks concealed their identity as they made their way through the Nether, keeping their heads down when they crossed someone's path up until they reached a mostly unexplored part of the dimension. Only one person had recognized them thus far, but thankfully it was someone Sam trusted.

"You're alive!" Fundy cried, running towards them both and dropping his packages in the process.

Sam raised his head slightly and pressed a finger to his lips, grinning. "Not many people know that," he reminded the young fox.

"Oh, right." Fundy pretended to look elsewhere, acting way more suspicious than he probably intended to be.

"I wanted to thank you for saving me back then."

"Oh, I, errr..." He rubbed the back of his furry neck with a sheepish, lopsided grin. "That was nothing. Puffy just needed someone who knew their way around redstone so..."

"Fundy helped you?" Philza suddenly piped up, removing his hood.

Fundy jumped, and stared at the avian. "Grandad— I mean Phil! No, Philza! Sir!" he stammered, almost falling over his own feet.

Sam was about to question his reaction, when he remembered Wilbur. It certainly made sense, but he had never realized how real the filial connection was until he saw it for himself.

Was.

Clearly, Philza had some sort of grudge against his grandson, probably over something involving Technoblade's execution plot and a certain period of house-arrest courtesy of L'Manberg. Sam had only heard of it in passing.

"Philza is fine, Fundy," the avian replied, cold and strict.

The fox nodded quickly and retrieved his dropped items, right before lowering his cap and taking his leave. "If anyone asks me, I'll say I never saw you," he replied, then scampered away.

Sam certainly appreciated his secrecy, but Philza's coldness didn't sit right with him. For a man who was prepared to rip out Sam's throat for trying to "take" his precious family from him, he was acting pretty disdainfully towards the ones he could reach.

That was, until Phil spoke again. "He reminds me so much of his father."

Sam couldn't really see it. Wilbur, to the best of his recollection, looked nothing like a fox, and was a lot more stubborn than his son. Perhaps there was something else that Sam couldn't perceive, hidden beneath the copper fur, but that Philza still knew was there. That was something he'd never have an answer to.

The Nether gave away soon after, their hike ending at a secluded portal a couple of hours walk away. When Sam stepped through it, he swallowed a fresh gulp of the familiar, mellow air he hadn't tasted in months. His mountain home hadn't moved, and his feet missed the crunchy grass of the wild field in front of it. The tundra was refreshing, sure, but there was no beating the mildness of his own, secret settlement. Although he was back, everything felt a little off. Not in a bad way – there was no fear of having been broken into, and the stiff redstone door could attest to that fact – but in a way that it simply didn't feel like *home* anymore.

Tommy's dirt shack felt like home.

Puffy's windmill at the top of Snowchester felt like home.

The White Mansion in the Badlands felt like home.

The Antarctic Commune felt like home.

The Community House felt like home.

His off-limits, hidden base carved deep into the mountain, the one he inhabited alone, in complete seclusion, didn't anymore. Oh, he still loved it, but there wasn't that strong sense of a loving hearth floating around. At least Philza was there with him, rendering the dark stone walls somewhat lighter.

That said, his workshop was what really brought him joy in the end. The shelves upon shelves of mechanical wonders, scraps and entire barrels of redstone powder were so

familiar to him. Before long, the redstone lamps fizzed to life, and Sam began to set up his workspace. Empty leather journals, books, pencils, and tools of all kinds littered the available surfaces, ready and waiting to be used by the skilled hands of a craftsman. The only detail that made his heart sink were the curled wooden chips carpeting the floor, remnants of the most difficult piece he ever had to carve; a child-sized coffin. However, Tommy was alive. He was alive, and there would be no coffins made any time soon. The doubts he had about the wings were all but banished from his mind, replaced by a ferocious desire to succeed in keeping his promise.

He would help Philza fly again.

The first day, Sam settled Phil into the "guest" room he had, untouched since it was first tidied and set up. When the avian jokingly asked his host if he was already expected, Sam decided to tell him the truth.

The room was for Tommy, just in case the boy had heeded Sam's offer and escaped his exile location to come and seek shelter in the mountains. It had never been used, and that had unfortunately lulled the man into a false, comforted mindset. If Tommy hadn't come, it was because he was doing alright. It hadn't crossed his mind that Dream had held such vicious control over him.

As Sam spoke, he watched Phil carefully. Perhaps it was the change of air, or the promise of touching the skies once again, but the avian was smiling. Instead of accusing Sam of meddling in affairs that didn't concern him, he thanked him for looking out for Tommy, to which Sam tried to brush off as something anyone would do for the boy. However, that wasn't true and he knew it.

Once their packs were laid down on beds and Philza was given a quick tour to get more familiar with his surroundings, the two men walked outside towards a small, softly sloped cliff. Sam wanted to see exactly what he had to deal with, and Phil complied.

Obsidian black wings stretched up over their heads and began to beat with the sheer force of a hurricane. Philza jumped— and immediately crashed, lopsided, into the earthy and stony mound. He rolled down to the bottom in a flurry of feathers but when Sam rushed to join him in a panic, he found the avian lying spread eagle on his back, laughing loudly in a patch of daisies. Thankfully, he wasn't hurt except for a small, dark bruise on his arm.

Sam soon assured Phil that he wouldn't push him off any more cliffs until he was kitted out with a prototype brace. Now he had a general idea of what needed to be done.

He *thought* he did, until he opened up the first, dusty biology book he could lay his hands on. It was alright analyzing the bone-structure of blue-tits and spindly storks and it gave him a good view of what to expect, but he needed bigger ideas.

He turned instead to a series of dusty journals he had in his possession, for some reason. He didn't remember where he got them, or why, but he knew that they had been gathering dust on one of his bookshelves for years on end. He didn't hide them, just simply tended to forget they were there. The people he did talk to about "those random books" were absolutely stunned that he held them in his clutches. Sam, not so much.

From the way people cooed over them, you would think that he was holding the key to eternal life itself, or the greatest treasure trove known to man and beastkind. But they were just books.

They were made of cream-coloured parchment, crammed with sketches drawn in a copper pen or pencil of everything from animals, to faces, to inventions, the whole accompanied by backwards-written sentences in a foreign language. The journals of an artist, an Old World pioneer. Sam had lots of other volumes that were so much more detailed and useful than these few, and perhaps the only thing that seemed to give them value in some eyes was the name attached to their contents.

That was back then, but today, Leonardo Da Vinci was his savior. The intricate bird sketches he had had a tendency to overlook were so much more useful to him now, and the concepts of a flying machine that never seen the day were exactly what he was looking for. Sam grabbed some paper, and began to draw up some blueprints. This is what it felt like to work alongside the ancient masters of his craft. The ghosts of history smiled upon him.

He worked tirelessly the first couple of days, barely taking a moment to eat. It was Philza who dragged him away for an hour or so to go for a walk. It was much needed, and Sam got to update the avian on the progress. As much as Philza appeared eternally grateful for his time, he still nudged the engineer with a smile.

"It's incredibly lonely up here mate," he said. "And I'm not a workaholic like you."

"Well," Sam replied. "I could maybe use you for measurements and anatomy research—"

"Or," Philza jumped in. "You could stop working your ass off and spend some time with me. Your papers aren't going to go anywhere!"

And as much as Sam wanted to keep working on the wings, he gave in to Phil's insisting. For a few hours every day, his workshop was locked shut, and they spent some time together. What seemed at first like a way to get his mind off things soon proved to be a lot more, for both of them. It was a chance to get to know the other they had grown to hate, and fix up a bond that could have been if they weren't as stubborn as each other.

Philza was an incredibly friendly soul at heart and even with useless wings chose to leap everywhere like a young stag, giving Sam the choice to linger behind or join in. The choice was obvious, and Sam made it with a smile.

The mountains around them proved to offer quite a few distractions, despite its secluded environment. The few, sparse lakes and bodies of water offered pleasant fishing spots, the beach a perfect place to search for fossils, and the wild plains the opportunity to train together. Philza helped Sam with his sword skills, and Sam taught Philza how to use tridents. It was all done in good company with minimal physical damage and lots of laughs.

And when the sun began to set and the nightly breeze began to drift in, the mountains proved to be the most breathtaking place for stargazing and falling deeply into the clutches of softly-spoken conversations.

"So," Sam breathed, blinking up at the night sky. "The myths aren't real."

He felt Philza shuffle next to him, likely in a shrug. "Nope, they were simply stories told by the ancients to explain the world around them." He snapped his fingers. "But the horse thing at Troy? That was real alright."

"Oh really?"

"I should know: I was there!"

I was there.

"Phil, how old are you exactly?" Sam never thought a day would come when he'd lower himself to such levels of disrespect, yet here he was: asking Philza's age.

The avian laughed. "Why? Are you coming up with a roast, mate?"

"No, I'm just curious. People joke that you're old, but..."

"But?"

Sam craned his neck to look at his friend. Phil's head was a few inches from his, flipped the other way around. His blue eyes sparkled, youthful and charming. "I don't know, you just don't look like it."

Philza burst out laughing again. "Thanks for the compliment," he scoffed. When he calmed down, he took a few deep breaths. "You stop counting after a while. The last milestone I checked was a few thousand years ago."

"That's a long time," Sam noted. "So, what's the deal? Did you find the fabled Fountain of Youth?"

"Yes, but that's not it."

"Well, spill the beans Philza! How does one become immortal?"

"Try charming Death, she's quite a sweetheart."

Sam couldn't tell if Philza was being serious or not, but he chose to simply grin to himself and turn away. He stared back up at the night sky. The cold, damp grass of the field soaked his back, but he barely paid it any heed with the spectacle stretching out above him. Constellations burned brightly all across the blue velvet, so much brighter than they were in the towns and cities. It was as if the mountains were also the stars' safe spot, and they congregated there to stare at their own little, shining wonders; mere mortals teeming across the earths and seas, staring up at the gods and their burning disciples. Tonight, the constellations seemed particularly interested in the two men lying down and watching them aimlessly.

Sam could name quite a few of their dotted figures, and used to try and show them to Tommy when the evening would allow it, but Philza knew so much more. In fact, who was to say that he hadn't discovered them hand in hand with astronomers like Galileo or Copernicus? To think that he was lying beside a man as old as the dusty history so many studied...

"You don't want it," Phil said to him all of a sudden.

Sam dragged his eyes away from the sky. "Don't want what?"

"Immortality, immunity to old age. It's not as pleasant as it seems." Philza's eyes darkened, veiled with a vacant curtain. "I've seen the horrors and beauty of the Old World. I've watched as men built cathedrals with spires that stroked the hands of their gods, their stories carved into the stone and stained glass that made them. I've watched

those same cathedrals burn only a handful of hundreds of years later, and be rebuilt once again. I've seen falling blades and falling heads in the name of revolution, the bloodied verses of Flanders' Fields being played in front of my very eyes. I've walked meadows and crossed oceans thick with blood and poppies, and I've seen towers torn down by machines that redstone engineers are explicitly stopped from attempting to even study. I've watched love live, survive and die peacefully, and new generations erase the old. I've watched them keep them alive too, and for years to come tales of two young Italian lovers or ambitious Scottish kings have etched their way into history, forever. I've touched screens that could tell you anything and everything at once, and forged friendships that seem like merely a blip in my long, long life. I've seen the perseverance, the ache, the joy and the determination of so many, but now I'm tired. You don't want immortality."

Sam didn't answer for a long time, staring in shock at Philza. The avian closed his mouth, and his gaze moved. He blinked, confused, almost as if he had just stepped out of a daydream. Perhaps it was merely a trick of the light enhanced by the speech, but Sam could see the exhaustion not only in the bags under the older man's eyes, but in his soul too.

He tried to settle back down, a little shaken himself. "You don't need to be immortal to see those things," he let the other know in a quiet voice.

Philza sighed. "And even then, a thousand years of experience are still not enough to comprehend them."

Nothing could, and nothing ever would. That was something many didn't understand, and they still insisted on striving towards a victory-less goal of completely understanding the pure, fallacious comedy that was the human mind, or any other creature's that came after it. And then, the mere prospect of leaving behind loved ones was unbearable.

Immortality was a deadly yet tantalizing fruit many wished to bite, only perceiving it for what looked like on the outside, coated in a shiny, appetizing skin: life, forever. The poison of the predicament would settle in soon after, slow and agonizing.

Sam would rather die than writhe in its clutches.

And yet...

"It can't all be bad," Sam mused. "You must have met some amazing people."

"Yeah," Phil replied, sounding so far away. "I did."

"Well..." The engineer shrugged, trying to stay light in his interjections. "Perhaps it was worth it then."

"Oh, I never said it wasn't worth it, Sam," Phil tutted, sitting up. His wings, undoubtedly sore and cramped, spread out once again, and he began to mindlessly prune the feathers. "I simply told you how lonely and devastating history can be for an immortal like me. Thousands of times, I've found myself staring down swords, cannons and bows alike, wondering which blow would be meant for me. Fate would always save my life, and take another in its place. For someone untouched by the passage of time, it seems like even damage refused to so much as caress my skin. I know I can die, Sam, but Time cannot be my murderer."

The talk of dying sparked something in Sam, something that gave him a furious amount of strength and determination, something that made him ready to make sure Philza wasn't going to depart for a long, long time. Maybe that was cruel, maybe Phil was looking forward to an eternal rest at some point.

Sorry old man, it's not going to be anytime soon.

"But you managed to get yourself a family, didn't you?" Sam asked, trying to deter Phil from his sad speeches and dark prospects. "Surely that was enough to keep going."

Oh my, that struck a melodious chord. Phil smiled, his shoulders sagging. The milky white aura of the moon shone golden around his figure, warm and welcoming. Golden hearted, some could say.

"It feels just like yesterday when my little Wilbur was born," the avian sighed. "Such a beautiful little boy. He looked so much like his mother..."

"If you don't mind me asking, what happened to his mother?"

If truth be told, Sam had never even thought about Phil having a romantic partner. To him, he was always Philza: the Angel of Death, Techno's fearless companion, the man who killed his own son and the useless father – that last one was back before their heart to heart talk, of course. The thought that Philza had a real, raw family was somewhat foreign to him, at least in so much detail.

And then he realized the question about Wilbur's mother should have been obvious. Not only did it take two and two to give life, but what influence did she have or not have on Tommy, who grew close to Puffy almost as much as he did to Sam?

"If only Death was here, she could tell you herself," Philza replied. It was said with a smile, but behind it lay a man who didn't want to be questioned on the matter anymore.

"I'm sorry," Sam said to him, nevertheless wanting to express overdue condolences. "It must have been unbearable."

All he got as a reply was a hum as Philza lay back down beside him on the grass. The tips of his wings tickled Sam's body, and that reminded him of something.

"I've made progress on the braces," he let the other know.

Phil's mood noticeably switched up. "Oh, really?"

Sam let his head fall back and tucked his arms behind it. "I think I've found something that might work," he said. "But I need to make sure I know what I'm doing. I have to find which metal to make the pieces from, for one thing. Can't be too heavy, but not too weak either. It's got to resist the air pressure and anything else, and then of course comes the problem of what to use for the sails, and—"

"Woah, easy there, mate!" Philza chuckled, stopping him with a hand on his chest. "Relax, you're doing great so far."

The engineer huffed, suddenly impatient to get back to his workshop. "Great isn't enough," he retorted. "I want it to be perfect."

"If everything was perfect, life wouldn't be fun."

"I thought you had enough of life," Sam smirked.

Phil swiped at him with a grumble, then changed the subject. "What have you done so far?" he asked.

Sam furrowed his brow, summoning his sketches back into his mind. "Just the main concept, really. It looks much like your own wings, just with softer curves along the bone and sharper edges at the tips of the feathers."

He traced the wing across the sky, linking the stars under his fingertips. The pictures of Da Vinci's wings and his own designs flapped across his brain like strange butterflies, set on keeping him awake and working.

"You like Leonardo's works too, huh?" Philza fell silent for a while, the only indication that he was still there being the rustling of his scorched feathers against the grass and Sam's side. "Will it work?"

Sam thought for a moment. "It should," he said. "In fact, I'll make sure it will."

"That's one hell of a promise," the other chuckled.

"Well..." Sam shifted, his back muscles aching just a little. "I'd consider that making mechanical wonders is my strong suit."

A strong suit indeed, but one that undoubtedly held multiple rounds of trial and error. During the next few days, he took life-sized measurements and constructed the first prototype. The same afternoon, he strapped it onto Philza's back and existing wings, then led him to the same hill he had jumped off the first time.

Again, Philza crashed into the earth, then complained that the braces weighed far too heavily on his bones and pushed him down. So Sam patched up what needed to be done, spending hours and hours alone and forging a multitude of different parts from different metals. Mismatching them, he tried new combinations on his existing frame.

When that was done and he was satisfied with the result, he helped Phil into the braces and let him try them once again. This time, the problems came from things other than the weight: the canvas was slightly ripped or too bulky, a screw wasn't tightened enough... The small details ended up driving Sam to many sleepless nights, and quite nearly to insanity. Yet still he persevered, desperate to get everything working just as he intended. He had come too far to just give up, and as a man with a heart he tried to keep as pure as he could, he had to keep his promise.

Third time's the charm, or so the sayings went. Sam had no idea if that was true or not, but he certainly didn't want to count on it.

"It should be working now," he said, deeply focused as he helped kit out Phil one again. He strapped everything on twice as tight, and was extra cautious regarding what he did or did not touch.

Philza had tried to help at first but apparently realizing that Sam wouldn't let him take the leeway, he resorted to standing perfectly still and being manhandled. "So, this is it?"

"It should be."

"In that case, let's make it special."

Before the engineer could even finish securing the last buckle, the avian had dashed off outside. Sam struggled to keep up, and panicked as he soon realized that Philza was *not* heading to the small hill that they were used to going to. Instead, he was scrambling up the nearest mountain peak, spiraling up to the pastel sky above. Sam yelled and tried to call Phil down, back to safety, but the angel no longer paid attention to him.

When Sam finally got to the top, Phil didn't even wait for him. He leapt off the edge and plummeted down. A moment passed, a moment where Sam felt his heart jump, before a dark winged figure shot back up from below and into the skies.

Into the skies. He was flying! Oh gods—

"PHIL!" Sam yelled, breathless, as his friend pirouetted at a dizzying height above him.

All he got back was a cry of triumph, and he quickly responded with his own. Finally, after so long, the Angel of Death was once more part of the heavens, a dark winged predator and heavenly being. Philza circled the sky a few more times and dove so close to Sam that he could see the purple shine of his black wings and the copper and gold fittings of the brace. Then, the avian zoomed towards the clouds and the burning sun, no more than a dark shadow against the magnificence of the skies he now touched once more.

Although confined to the rocky summit of the mountain, Sam shared the feeling of pure freedom, his heart and soul carried by the canvas of the braces. He created those. He did that.

He made Philza fly again.

"I could kiss you right now!" Philza cried with joy when he approached Sam again, hovering just slightly over the floor. He cupped his face in his hands and in a moment of pure elation, pressed relentless, grateful pecks of his cheek.

Sam laughed, teasingly trying to push him off and failing, resulting in more laughter. "I can't believe they work!" he pushed out between two gasps.

"I'm never walking again!" Phil rejoiced, preparing to push himself once more up between the clouds. "Oh fuck, I've missed this so much! Sam, you're a genius, a pioneer, a—" He didn't even finish, whooping once more in ecstasy.

A genius, a pioneer.

Terms only used for the mythical, and the deserving. Sam had finally earned a place at their table alongside history and legends' finest.

However, as he watched the avian put on an impressive aerial display for him and all the hidden entities who cared to watch, he never guessed that simple act of kindness and forgiveness was the key to sit at another gathering, and bear another name he would soon learn to hold with pride.



"Daedalus, welcome to the Syndicate."

Daedalus nodded in thanks as Protesilaus welcomed him to the meeting room with open arms. He had no idea that such a beautiful place was hidden under the Antarctic Commune, or that its members weren't as peacefully retired from warfare as first they seemed. Something was clearly still afoot.

He took a seat next to Herostratus, who gave him a friendly wink. "It's really fucking cool, isn't it?" As far as he knew, his fireborn friend was also a newer member but seemed much more comfortable than he was, resting his feet up on the table and reclining in his chair.

Daedalus in comparison was straight-backed and attentive, still in awe of the majesty and utter secrecy of it all. His mind had forced itself to start calling his friends by their given names, and even started to like his own.

Zephyrus chose it for him, and after seeing him stroking his newly-fitted braces with a smile, he knew why. There couldn't be a more perfect name waiting for him.

Daedalus.

He looked around the room. Lethe took out his memory book and an inkwell, chatting away with Nemesis who was still wrapped in a sweet-smelling aura of freshly baked goods and wild flowers. Her presence in the Commune now made a whole lot more

sense, and the corner of Daedalus' mouth curved up into a smirk. Lovely Nemesis, part of an underground anarchist Syndicate. Imagine that.

Protesilaus called them all to attention with the crackling flare of a match. He lit the lantern hanging above the strange green and white table, then stood back.

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," he grunted.

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," echoed the others in unison.

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," Daedalus mumbled a little later than the others, covering his embarrassment with a cough.

"Before we really begin, there are two things I want to say," Protesilaus announced before turning to two of the Syndicate's members. "First of all, Herostratus: feet, table, off."

Herostratus rolled his eyes and grumbled, but reluctantly obeyed the piglin.

"Thank you. Next, I think Daedalus deserves our deepest gratitude."

The man in question sat up straighter, feeling everyone's eyes on him.

"True to the myths, he achieved the impossible, and helped Zephyrus fly once again. That alone earns him an honourable seat among us."

"It was nothing, really," Daedalus rushed to say. "I'm just happy I managed to help a friend."

"It may seem like nothing to you, but it's everything to me," Zephyrus smiled. "I am forever in your debt."

"It's amazing," Nemesis agreed, her whole, soft face alight with admiration.

Lethe gave him a silent thumbs up.

Daedalus felt his chest swell with pride, relieved that he was loved for an impressive piece of machinery instead of feared for it. "In that case, I can only say you're welcome," he chuckled. "Seems like I'm outnumbered."

"It appears you certainly are," Protesilaus laughed as well. "But just because you're outnumbered doesn't mean you can't come out victorious. Speaking from experience."

He leaned forwards, suddenly serious. "That is in fact exactly why we're gathered here today: we need to start plotting."

"Against Kinoko? Finally?"

"No, no. In fact, I don't think that was ever going to happen." All eyes turned to the fireborn warrior at the table. "Herostratus?"

"Yeah..." The insolent, stubborn warrior had grown silent and reserved, hands clasped on the table at the mention of his home. "Forget about Kinoko. They're not worth it."

Silence followed as everyone looked at each other, and back at Herostratus. Daedalus placed a comforting hand on his knee, rubbing his thumb gently in circles.

"I'm fine," the fireborn assured him, rigid.

Protesilaus took the lead again. "Kinoko Kingdom isn't worth our strength, but finding and getting rid of Dream is. Remember; he may be outnumbered, but that doesn't mean anything. He could be amassing an army as we speak."

"What army? Every realm is out to get him," Lethe said.

"That's true," the piglin agreed. "But I think we all know that Dream can be very... persuasive."

There he paused, and hunched his shoulders. From a large, brooding warrior with an almost unquenchable bloodlust, he now looked so small compared to the rest of the Syndicate. Even his shadow seemed to shrink against his high-backed chair. No one moved a muscle, watching him too intently. Daedalus waited and waited, until Protesilaus' looked back up and locked deep, sorrowful eyes with him.

"Sam," he said, momentarily breaking the secretive façade that the Syndicate had pulled up between them all. "I—"

"I know," Sam replied, nodding. "I know what you did."

Technoblade looked surprised. "You do?"

"I found it strange that someone like Dream would put a normal food order through you," he chuckled. "I just didn't realize it was a red flag until he drove my own trident through me."

The piglin forced out a smile, and nervously laughed along. "I was expecting you to provoke me to a duel at dawn for that."

Sam shrugged. "Why would I? Dream must have done something worthwhile to have you of all people owe him a favor, and I know how you feel about reciprocity. Also, you would win the duel, no question."

Techno looked taken aback, and clearly confused as to whether he should laugh or stay respectful. "I wouldn't count on it," he replied. "You're so much stronger than me in ways you don't even know, and I'm glad you are fighting by our side."

Sam bowed his head respectfully, unable to hide his growing smile and affection for his new allies.

"*My brother*," Techno had called him and ironically or not, Sam wished that they really were.

Protesilaus cleared his throat, and the meeting resumed. "Dream is very persuasive," he reminded them all again. "And he wouldn't have been so desperate to escape if he didn't have a plan."

"Why not?" Lethe jumped in again. His new confidence looked good on him. "The holding cell wasn't a particularly nice place when I saw it. Desperation makes people do rash things." He suddenly tensed up and glanced around him, before wrapping his tail around himself and looking down. "I'm... also speaking from experience."

"Dream is battle-hardened beyond belief," Herostratus said, standing up. He leaned against the table, staring at each of the five other members in turn. "I've lived with him for years; in fact, he was my first real friend, along with George. I know him better than anyone, and Protesilaus is right. If Dream got out so quickly, it was because he had a plan."

"Then it must be a good one if he had to kill his warden on the way," Nemesis pointed out, casting Daedalus a sympathetic look. "Are you better?"

He automatically raised a hand to where his scars were concealed under layers of winter-worthy material, and nodded. "Much better, thank you."

Gods, Nemesis was a real sweetheart.

"In that case, we need to think about striking while the iron is still hot," Zephyrus butted in. "If Dream has a bloody good plan afoot, we need to get to him before he can put it in action!"

"That's easier said than done," Nemesis said. "He's disappeared off the face of the realms completely. No one has even glimpsed him since he escaped from the prison."

"Could he have left for good?"

"Of course not," Herostratus spoke up again. "As I said, I know him. He holds grudges and he *will* come back for revenge."

"Well, what can we do?" Zephyrus asked, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Just wait until he strikes?"

"Call in reinforcements?"

"Send out our own search parties?"

"Warn everyone?"

Daedalus nervously got up from his seat in the middle of the shouted ideas and general commotion. Only Protesilaus had caught his gaze, and raised his heavy hands for silence. A hush fell over the Syndicate, suddenly attentive to their newest member. Named after a brilliant inventor, surely he had an idea worth hearing? Unfortunately, he would have to disappoint them.

"Going after Dream is all very well, and I want to see him brought to justice as much as you all do," he began. "But we can't think about taking him on fully until another threat is eradicated."

"Which one?" Herostratus questioned.

"The Egg." His statement was met by a brief silence.

Then, Herostratus snorted. "The Egg?" he scoffed. "What's it going to do, overgrow our flower patch?"

"It's a lot more serious than that and you know it," Daedalus replied.

The fireborn shrugged. "All I've heard about it recently is that it grows, that's it. The *Eggpire* is the real threat here."

"Exactly. No Egg means no Eggpire, and you have no idea what that growth can do! It hurt so many people, blackmailed them and even killed some! It tortured me and made my friends leave me to die, for crying out loud!"

Daedalus hadn't realized how worked up he was until he realized that all the others' eyes were glued to him, wide and shocked, and that his hand throbbed from the force with which he hit the table. The lantern overhead swayed. The ground above rumbled threateningly, an omen. He mumbled an apology and took a deep breath.

Nemesis filled the silence. "Herostratus, he's right. You don't know half of what it can do."

"I don't want it to hurt any more people," Daedalus said, a lot more calmly. "The Egg needs to go before we focus our sights on Dream again."

"I agree," Protesilaus nodded. "The Egg is the threat we need to worry about the most here. Imagine how hard it would be if us or any of our potential allies got distracted in the middle of a confrontation; it could have disastrous consequences!" He raised his hand. "All in favour of temporarily switching targets?"

Immediately, Daedalus was the second to show his determination, followed by Nemesis, Lethe and Herostratus. It took Zephyrus a moment to react – likely lost in his thoughts – but he too ended up showing his approval regarding the plan.

Protesilaus leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Right, we go after the Egg," he concluded. "The gods know how much it needs to go anyways."

"But what if this infection *is* a god?" Lethe asked, pointed ears twitching nervously. "What then?"

"Well, if gods can bleed, gods can die," Nemesis said. "Fundy said that to me once. I think he's right; we just need to see if the Egg can be harmed–"

Daedalus cut her off. "It can, I've seen it be done on the tendrils. There's a possibility that the source itself could be just as vulnerable."

The rest of the Syndicate seemed elated by the news, sharing surprised looks and drinking up all of his words.

"How?" Protesilaus questioned, leaning forwards, hands clasped with the deepest of interest. Near him, Lethe prepared his pen and his journal, acting as the devoted scribe he was. "How can it be damaged?"

Daedalus smiled. "I know a guy."

Chapter Fifty-Four: Blue Fire

"Blue fire."

A match was lit, and was dropped onto a pile of shiny red tentacles. The sack they lay on flared up, the flames changing from orange to blue, before engulfing the everything in a blazing bonfire. The tendrils shrieked like banshees, and everyone rushed to cover their ears and shy away.

Even then, Ranboo felt like he was about to cry and scream along with them, his eardrums ringing and close to bleeding. He had half a mind to bury his head into the snow underneath his feet like an ostrich. The screaming continued, echoing around the vast, open landscape of the tundra until the hybrid was certain that the whole SMP could hear it, and beyond.

It took a gentle tap on his shoulder from Techno to finally unplug his ears and open his eyes, chasing the dancing particles in front of his vision. He looked around, and stared at the smoldering pile of debris in the middle of their circle.

Captain Puffy stepped forward, and ground the remains of the spores into the snow. The ash left a dark mark, a blemish across the perfectly white canvas. It was sacrilegious, in its own, satisfying way.

She looked at them all again, and shrugged. "That's all there is to it."

Behind her, Sam grinned, glancing at them all expectantly. To be completely honest, Puffy was certainly not what the Commune were picturing when Sam mentioned a "guy" back in the Syndicate's latest meeting. All in all, however, they were relieved when she came to Techno's door. At least Sam's contact was someone that they could trust and not have to cross-examine every ten minutes. Then again, it appeared that they were still just cautious enough to not hold the demonstration inside the Syndicate's base of

operations or so much as mention its existence. Whether it was because of the Egg's spores or Puffy herself wasn't clear, but Ranboo had a sneaking suspicion that it was a bit of both.

Techno stepped forward and crouched down over the snow. Ranboo watched as he took a pinch of the remaining ashes and ran them through his fingers.

"Blue fire, eh?" He whistled. "Well, what do you know..."

Puffy nodded, rubbing her hands together. "That's all it takes."

"I wonder why it has to be blue exactly," Sapnap said out loud, slipping off one of his gloves and staring at the burning veins through his skin. "I could just go there right now and set the whole thing ablaze."

"I don't know," the captain replied. "The blue to counter the red, maybe?"

"That sounds a little ridiculous."

"As I said, I don't know. All I do understand is that it works, and if you want to try and get rid of the Egg, it's your best bet."

The best bet. It began to sink in how enormous a task this would actually be, and Ranboo gulped. Taking down an Egg. If it was like any other, they could just throw it against a wall and be done with it, but this one was no ordinary egg.

"Maybe we should go inside," Techno suggested. "Unless the Captain has another science experiment to show us?"

The sheep shivered and shook her head, stamping her boots against the ice. "Nope, I don't. Let's not freeze to death when we don't have to."

The Syndicate and their visitor began to trudge across the snow, back towards the cabins. Ranboo lingered behind, absent-mindedly hopping in and out of Techno's large footsteps like a toddler.

The Egg still preoccupied him. Ranboo had seen it once before; it was one of the most intimidating things he had ever laid eyes on, and even when he wasn't tricked down into its underground lair, he would see the tendrils at every turn. If he didn't know any better, he would say that killing it was an impossible feat and they'd be better off laying low in their Northern homes of the Commune and Snowchester, letting the mainland devolve into chaos.

And then, his mind had the courtesy to be of use, and remind him that the Egg drove him to almost kill Techno, and ruin his own life.

With that realization, he looked up. Sam was walking at the head of their small group with Puffy and Philza. Phil kept walking with one of his wings stretched out for viewing, all while the engineer explained and showed off the braces he made for them, ecstatic, while the captain asked questions. Occasionally, the avian would look around and say something, resulting in all three of them bursting out into fits of laughter.

Ranboo stared at them. The Egg had almost completely ruined Sam's life as well: if it wasn't for them saving him in the nick of time, he would be completely dead. The Egg, as far as he understood from what the man had told him, had pushed away the only two friends in the prison at the time that could have helped him. Not only that, wasn't the Egg responsible for that unhealed collection of wounds on Sam's arm, and Techno's large scar too for that matter?

Taking down an entire, otherworldly entity and the cult that followed it would be a massive risk with a low chance of success, but they had to try. For everything that... that... that bastard of an Egg had done to everyone, they had to at least *try*! That thought alone was enough to put the spring back in the hybrid's step.

Once they had all huddled into the nearest cabin and each took a seat, Sapnap lit the fire and Techno began to make everyone some hot chocolate. There, they began to talk real business.

"It's all very well saying that we need blue fire," Ranboo said, warming himself by the hearth. Sam's hound trotted towards him and lay her head on his knee. He scratched her behind her ears. "But how do we get it, exactly?"

Nikki heaved herself onto a nearby table, mindlessly stroking the brewing stand sitting next to her. "I think it needs to be lit on soul sand." She turned her head to someone across the room. "That's right, isn't it? Soul sand?"

The hybrid followed her gaze as it landed on Puffy who, to his surprise, didn't say anything at first and chose to focus her attention on the floor. The mug Techno had handed her was swaying between her fingers, in a movement that Ranboo recognized as nervousness.

Eventually, she briefly looked up and held Nikki's gaze just long enough to answer. "Uhh, yeah. Soul sand." She looked down again, until Sam spoke up.

From his perch on the windowsill behind her, he looked unbelievably relaxed for the situation at hand. Then again, the hybrid had to admit that the tundra's quaint little settlement with little to no obligations did that to people.

"There's a soul sand valley near the Snowchester portal in the Nether," he said. "Me and Puffy saved Michelle there a while back."

"Michelle?" Technoblade questioned with a raised eyebrow.

Taking the mug he was handed, Sam nodded. "Yeah, her name is Michelle, why?"

The piglin laughed and shook his head. "Gods, you have a kid too, Sam?"

Puffy turned to him too with a smirk. "Well?"

Ranboo watched, amused, as Sam stumbled over his answer, clearly trying to get out of the pit he dug himself into, and failing. "I wouldn't say she's my daughter or anything but... I mean, Puffy's more the one who—"

Techno cut him off with a laugh. "Nice try," he teased, ruffling the other's hair. "But you're not fooling anyone. I'll have to properly meet the little one someday." He glanced back at Ranboo. "Your one too, Ender boy. Both of them deserve to properly visit Uncle Techno."

Philza spat out his drink. "*Uncle* Techno? Where the hell did that come from, mate? What happened to murdering orphans? Who are you, foul creature, and why have you stolen my friend's hide?"

The piglin chuckled, roughly pushing Phil's hat down on his head, all in good faith. "Why not? All your collective complaining about families and partners is starting to rub off on me," he grunted. "You've corrupted me!" He pointed an accusatory finger to all those concerned, which was everyone except Nikki. "All of you!"

He turned away, humming and satisfied with himself, while Sam, Puffy and Ranboo shared a look – all three trying not to burst out into fits of hysterical laughter.

Thankfully, Sam saved them all, or most likely tried to save his own skin. "So anyway," he coughed. "The soul sand valley. We could get an endless supply there."

"Soul sand valley, right," Techno echoed, tone a lot more mellow. "And definitely no other children thrown in for good measure."

"Techno!"

"Alright, alright, I'm just making sure!"

"We ignore Techno," Sam whispered to everyone else, undoubtedly conscious that the piglin heard him.

Puffy nodded. "Agreed, *honey*," she teased. "And perhaps you can take the little one out for a game of catch this weekend."

He playfully swiped at her. "Don't you start."

If it wasn't for the impending threat of the Egg hanging over them all, Ranboo was ready to believe that this gathering was nothing less than a family; a mismatched one to be sure made up of war criminals, an arsonist or two, wanted traitors and some who rightly deserved a place among the myths, with a few questionable morals thrown into the mix. But they were a family nevertheless. They were *his* family, and he loved them all.

But of course, nothing could ever last forever, and Sapnap's interruption was the perfect example of why.

"So we can get the sand, but then what?" he asked. "What do we do? Start burning the visible tendrils?"

"The tendrils have started to fall back," Puffy told them all, raising her hand before any of them could ask any questions. "No I don't know why, all I know is that they are and it's strange."

"It could be dying," Ranboo suggested with a shrug, looking at everyone in turn and waiting for someone to make a comment.

Phil was the first one to do so. "I don't know, mate," he said, face scrunched up, deep in thought. "It seems too... powerful to just die all of a sudden."

The hybrid didn't know what else to suggest, except for the obvious. "Then maybe it's preparing for an attack," he mumbled, fearing the worst.

"Whatever it ends up being for," Techno interrupted. "We need to go and see the source anyways. Our next actions will depend whether its alive or not."

"But the cave is constantly guarded," Nikki pointed out. "I've seen the entrance from afar, there's always someone there."

"Then how can we get in?" Techno wondered out loud, starting to pace.

A silence fell over the room as everyone began to ponder. Ranboo could almost hear the gears in their minds whirring with ideas and schemes.

Well, Ranboo's own mind was useless, that was for sure, but his memory book was not. Taking it out, he began to scan it for anything that could help. That was when a thick piece of card chose to slip out from between the pages and land on the end of his boot. He bent down and retrieved it.

You are cordially invited to

~ THE RED BANQUET ~

In celebration of the recent peace and prosperity between all nations, the Eggpire invites you to take part in a masquerade ball, dedicated to turning over a new leaf and celebrating true unity.

Formal dress required.

The date and time were written in the corner, smudged only slightly where the messenger crow had undoubtedly held the card over a long flight.

The card, the invitation to be exact.

Oh.

"Uhh, Techno?" Ranboo tried to catch his attention, sheepishly waving the card in the air.

The piglin glanced up briefly as he paced and, noticing what Ranboo was holding, beckoned him over. He read over the invite a couple of times, then sighed and pinched his brow.

"I don't know if I should scold you for giving this to me so late," he grumbled, "or praise you for remembering to give it to me at all."

"What is it?" Nikki asked, trying to peer over the piglin's beefy forearms.

He held it up for all to see. "Our ticket in," he said. "It seems like we are invited to a party held in the heart of the Eggpire."

"And Ranboo just casually forgot about it?" Phil spluttered, clearly unable to hide his shock. "Ranboo! It's a fucking invitation, mate! How could you just *forget* about it?"

Was that a joke? Seriously? Perhaps Phil's brain wasn't what it used to be.

The hybrid held up his hands in self-defense. "Selective memory, I swear," he replied.

Okay, it *was* his fault, in a way. He should perhaps flick through his memory book more often to avoid nasty, belated surprises like the one held in Techno's hand.

"Are we all invited?" Puffy asked, stepping up to read it.

"It doesn't say we aren't," Techno replied, flipping it over. He read the other side out loud. "*To the Blade, and to all those who have the honour of fighting beside him.*"

"This smells like a trap," Sapnap said, wrinkling his nose at the foul odor of dishonesty that Ranboo smelled too. "Why would they invite *us* of all people? We're all wanted to some degree."

"I'm not even supposed to be alive," Sam added.

"Well... I've heard others in the Greater SMP vaguely talk about it," Nikki piped up, her sweet voice somewhat unsure. "And the White Mansion has also been receiving constant streams of carts and merchants recently. The queue stretched all the way down the coast, last time I checked. It seems genuine."

"Genuine or a large-scale, elaborate trap?" Sapnap questioned, his face still smeared with an air of caution that he shared with Ranboo.

"Well, we can be sure about something," Techno said.

Ranboo stared at him, perplexed. "What?"

"If they're throwing a large banquet, naming it after the colour red and signing it off as their cult, then the Egg must still be very much alive and well."



Bad was in a good mood. He was often that way, but today in particular made him hum and smile a lot more than usual. After countless hours of meticulous planning finally came the countless hours of meticulous preparation. Progress was being made quickly, and that only made him smile wider.

The halls of the White Mansion had never felt so alive and chatter-filled. The shutters had all been flung open as were all the doors, letting in the glorious golden sunlight that fill the rooms with a pearly white glare. The banners of the Badlands – and now a batch depicting the Eggpire's new flag – flapped with the draughts and every passing individual, greeting them with soft silky caresses as they went on their way.

Bad had been on his feet for the past three days, relentlessly striding from one room to another, and his voice hurt from answering repeated questions and shouting instructions from across several rooms. It was tiring, but it was worth it.

The demon finally took a moment to sit down on one of the long, plush and upright sofas in the living room, overlooked by a large, finely sculpted fireplace of polished white marble. There, he began to tick off a few more boxes on the endless pile of papers littering the low table at his feet, satisfied.

Progress, progress, progress! How wonderful it felt! The Red Banquet would be a success, but–

"Not poinsettias!" Bad cried as the flowers were presented to him. "What do you think this is, a Christmas party?" He took a moment to think. "Get me some roses and carnations, and whatever else the Egg can give you."

The florist looked and sounded confused. "Like what?"

"I don't know, just go ask." Bad waved them away and when the footsteps faded, he allowed himself to take a breather.

The Egg's well of voices hissed relentless praises into his ear, and he sighed with a smile.

"It's my pleasure, my Lord," he mumbled back.

"You good there, Bad?"

The demon opened his eyes and looked up, just in time to see Antfrost walk towards him with a wide smile. He leapt up from his seat to greet him.

"I'm fine," he assured the cat, gesturing at the paperwork on the table before him. "In fact, I can sometimes believe that this pile is getting smaller."

Ant purred, his tail flicking out behind him. "It's exhausting," he sighed. "But the result will be remarkable in the end!"

Bad agreed wholeheartedly. "You look tired," he noted. "You should go and get some sleep."

The cat laughed. "Oh, absolutely not!" he mewled, taking out a clipboard and a pen. "We'll never get anything done if we're both asleep!"

Bad admired his dedication, but was still insistent on his friend relaxing just that little more. "We'll never get anything done if we're both dead either," he told him with a tut.

"I doubt the Egg would let that happen," the cat replied, and began to read from his list. "I've sorted out the desserts," he said. "And the tablecloths are coming along nicely. I've also taken the liberty to start interviewing potential staff for the event and have tied down five waiters already."

Bad was impressed. "I have to say, Ant, you're a professional at party planning."

"Oh well, you know, I've had a fair share of practice, especially with—" He stopped himself, and from a beaming feline, he turned into a mildly depressed creature. "I planned something a while ago..." Bad watched him fiddle with the ring on his finger. Normally a nervous tic, he had a feeling that it meant more this time. "I doubt it will ever happen now..." A moment later, Antfrost perked up, his red eyes gleaming again. "I'm going to go and look over the meat trays."

"You go do that," the demon nodded, the obvious, hungry glint in his friend's eyes unmistakable.

"Oh, also," the cat added just before he walked out the door. "The tailor's coming at around five o'clock."

"Then make sure not to eat too many roasts, you muffin," the demon teased, earning him a playful hiss.

Bad was lucky to have a friend and close companion like Antfrost. If it wasn't for him, then he had no idea how he would have ever managed the preparation on his own. He

reclined in his seat and tilted his head back, his hood falling off. His neck was thankful for the stretch, but his eyes a little less.

Up above him, mounted on the chimney, sat a large, varnished oil painting Bad had commissioned a year or two ago now. Framed with gold, it depicted three figures he knew well – however, only two were somewhat visible. The third was concealed by a thin, black veil draped over the corner.

It was a masterpiece to be sure and was duly complimented by the few who visited the mansion, but it still held a few imperfections it seemed that only Bad had managed to pick out. They were petty, but still enough to remind him that this was indeed a painting, and not a mirror.

Bad's features and horns looked a little too sharp, like a knife, as he was sat in a high-backed armchair in the middle of the canvas. The curious twinkle in Ant's eyes was invisible, instead making him look nervous, and Sam was portrayed as too rigid and too strict, the kindness in his smile absent.

Sam...

A gust of ocean wind from the open window blew into the room, lazily pulling off the black veil. It gracefully drifted down to the floor, and Bad inhaled sharply as the cold eyes of judgement glared down at him. He looked away, and instead turned his attention to whoever had just walked into the room.

"Put the veil back on," he ordered.

"The mourning period has passed, you know," a nervous voice let him know. The florist was back, this time with another arrangement that was probably more to the organizer's liking.

The demon barely raised his head. "Please," he whispered hoarsely, and listened as the florist obeyed and climbed up on a nearby stool.

Even after Sam's figure was hidden again, Bad could still feel his eyes on him. In fact, all three, painted pairs stared him down. *You did this*, he heard them whisper, although he couldn't know for sure if it was the Egg talking or his own guilt.

"Take the bouquets to the cavern," the demon said.

"But you haven't even seen them yet," the florist replied.

"I don't need to." *But I do need to be alone.* "I trust your second-time judgement."

That was all, it seemed, he needed to say to get them out of his horns. Like Ant before them, they made their exit and didn't return, leaving Bad alone with his notes and his thoughts. His thoughts... They never used to be such disturbing things.

You can't do this! I'm one of you! I'm your friend! There wouldn't be the Badlands without me by your side!

Bad screwed his eyes shut, trying desperately to block out Sam's screams as they filled his ears again. They hadn't left him alone since that day in the prison, and it seems like they never would. The Egg was right, though: Sam was an enemy, and saving him would be pointless. He just had to live with that, and remind himself daily that he had done the right thing. He curled up on himself, sinking into the abyss of plush velvet.

His throat tightened, almost as much as a noose. He held it tightly, the blood of his friend choking him. Pandora's Vault was just visible outside the window, so Bad rushed over and closed the curtains. It was one thing to be plagued by a ghost, but it was another having to stare at the colossal tomb he was encased in.

"I DON'T CARE IF BAD'S BUSY, I WANT TO KNOW WHERE THE FUCK HE IS!"

The demon froze as a shout echoed from the mansion's hallway, followed by considerably calmer and anxious voices. The guilt of Sam's death lightened only a little, replaced by something much more chilling. Another ghost, this time of someone who Bad knew was very much alive, but who should not have been there. He couldn't be there.

And yet, he was.

Skeppy strode through the living room's door. "Bad, what the *fuck* have you done?!"

A gaggle of merchants followed him and tried to pull him back. The newcomer threatened them with a punch, and kicked them away.

Bad rushed away from the curtains, and towards the door. "Let him go!" he demanded, eyes widening by the second. He waved the others away, and hey listened without so much as a mumble.

Skeppy turned around and slammed the double doors shut. "Bad, *what the fuck?*"

The demon didn't move, his hands gripping the edge of the sofa with all their might. His heart began to beat faster, in utter terror. "Skeppy, what are you doing here?"

The other ignored him, striding closer. His blue eyes were ablaze, as were the crystals coating his skin. He looked messy and travel-weary, but that certainly didn't stop him from confronting the demon with whatever energy he had left.

"I asked you a stupid question," Skeppy growled, marching closer and closer. "What the *fuck* did you do?"

Bad took a step forwards. "What are you doing here?" A familiar panic returned to his body, and he tried to reach out for his friend. "The Egg! You're not safe here! Why did you come?"

The Egg's whispers snickered in his ears, assuring him that the demon was right. Skeppy was in grave danger.

That didn't seem to stop him, and Skeppy flung something at Bad's chest. It hit him square on and knocked his breath out of him. He caught it before it fell to the floor and looked down to see what it was. A pamphlet. A pamphlet he knew well, and he had looked forward to reading when it first came out. Now it weighed in his hands like a ton of bricks, heavy with dread and regret.

Skeppy slammed a finger to the papers. "What the fuck is this?"

The demon put it down and looked away. "Language," he mumbled.

"I don't give a shit about your "language"! I want to know why you pushed a kid to write this and ruin his life!"

"Ranboo had it coming," Bad retorted, trying to believe everything was a dream, in vain.

"So what, Sam had it coming too?" Skeppy spat. When the demon glanced back, he was heartbroken to find tears in his friend's eyes. "Yeah, I know about everything. The Egg is very chatty when it wants to be. What the hell did you do?"

"I pushed a kid to take some responsibility for his actions and I got rid of a traitor," Bad replied in a dry tone. "I don't see what's wrong with any of that."

"Then you're blind as fuck!" Skeppy yelled. "I came back to convince myself that the Egg was lying, that you weren't what it was saying you had become, and now... and now..."

He angrily wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. Tears ran down his cheeks, crystallizing as they went and tinkling to the floor like little diamonds.

Bad approached him again, and tentatively placed a hand on his shoulder. Skeppy tensed up, but didn't push him away. Slowly but surely, the demon brought him into a hug.

"You're a monster," Skeppy muttered, refusing to hug Bad back.

Bad paused, his heart thumping loudly. "I know," he sighed. "I know... But I did it for you." He turned Skeppy's face up to him, wiping the gemstone tears off his cheeks with his clawed thumb. "Everything I've done, I did it for you. I left you on that island for a reason, I had to make tough decisions for *you*."

For Skeppy, and consequently, for the Egg.

Skeppy was cold, thankfully as he was supposed to be. His glistening, stone encrusted body was no longer boiling hot like it was when the Egg had taken hold of him, and his diamonds had turned back to their original colour. Skeppy was cured. He was cured!

Bad profusely and silently thanked the crimson for withdrawing from his dearest friend. Now the Banquet would have to be made even more splendid and wonderful, and the demon was more than ready to do that.

Bad forced out a smile. "Remember what I said last time I visited you? That there was one more big thing I needed to do?"

Skeppy nodded, still visibly cautious.

"That big thing is coming up very soon and once it's done, I promise that everything will be over."

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

"I will keep this one," Bad assured him.

"In that case, you can promise me something else," Skeppy mumbled.

"What?"

"That whatever you have to do, you won't push me away for it. I'm tired of us both facing everything on our own."

The demon froze. Not the Banquet. He couldn't let Skeppy attend the Banquet, not with the Egg's involvement in it or what was—

"Not for the big event," Bad replied. "But for everything else, yes. A hundred times yes. I'm sorry, I'll never leave you again."

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Bad," Skeppy muttered with an icy tone, but the way that he melted into the hug told Bad that he was somewhat forgiven.

Chapter Fifty-Five: All The Colours I Can't See

The moon was shining high and fully in the sky when the Council filed into the library building. Newly finished and furnished once again, this was the first meeting that had been held there since the fire.

George had almost forgotten what it felt like to solemnly make his way into the dark, shadowy halls of the empty, lifeless building, surrounded by people so much older than him.

The elderly were as dusty and as leathery as the old books that stuffed the shelves around them, and all just as knowledgeable and wise. George understood why Karl had called them to be part of the Council: Kinoko Kingdom needed a good gathering of more mature minds to help make the right decisions. History had already shown that cabinets of impulsive, younger war generals and soldiers weren't the most trustworthy or responsible.

And drowned in the sea of wrinkles were the three youngest members, the founders of the kingdom: Karl, Sapnap and George. Even then, George felt severely out of place.

Karl was Kinoko's leader, of course his presence would be required but even then, he fit in perfectly among his older peers. If it wasn't for his young-looking, angelic physique, he would be no different to them in tongue or memory, or tired silver eyes.

Then there used to be Sapnap. Also young, but holding a high-ranking position as Karl's partner. He was the equivalent of a royal consort, but was also a brilliant strategist that had been involved in many wars and military offensives. Although Kinoko Kingdom had

sought no conflict with any other nations, the fireborn's expertise when it came to defense and the upkeep of a decent-sized army was greatly appreciated.

And finally, there was George. The disgraced monarch known for sleeping through everything and anything, only dragged into Kinoko's founding because one of his two best friends was involved. Sitting beside Karl and Sapnap, he felt like an ugly, bulbous toadstool in a forest of truffles. It seemed like he was invited as part of the Council simply to not be left out. Karl seemed to pity him, and George couldn't bear that.

That pity-place he held was the main reason he had started dreading Council meetings, the distaste only heightened when Sapnap's sentence was being discussed.

The elderly were brought in to make the *right* decisions, they said. What a joke.

Now, George only went for Karl's sake. Of course, it was as a friend, but also out of sheer concern. Having witnessed two of his fits, due to visions or whatever the heck had happened, George made sure to keep Karl in his line of sight as much as he could. If he was being overbearing, Karl certainly didn't say anything about it. Even when the leader had gone off alone to prepare for the meeting that very night, George waited patiently outside the library like a guard dog, for hours until the doors were opened.

Inside, he had eyes for no one else, desperate to make sure that Karl was alright. Thankfully, his friend seemed to be doing just fine, and was busy pacing in front of the large, gaping fireplace that roared like a dragon's mouth.

George had taken no particular notice of the Council's new meeting room, rebuilt and renovated, until he and the other members realized that there was no table to be found. Faced with questioning stares, George watched as Karl drew his eyes from his hands and waved dismissively.

"The table isn't quite done yet," he said. "I apologize for making you all stand, but this meeting shouldn't hopefully take too long."

George was fine with standing and did so with his head held high. That was more than he could say for some of the older advisors, who teetered and clutched their walking sticks, all while muttering their disapproval through gritted teeth.

"This is the first meeting we've had in a while, so before I tell you the reason for it, I would like to quickly ask you all for progress reports."

George himself had none to give, if only to tell the entire Council that their leader had been acting strangely. He kept his mouth shut, and simply listened as the rest of the assembled took turns talking. It wasn't his place to reveal anything Karl would or wouldn't want to be widely known.

"Most of the houses have been fixed," said one member.

"The pagodas are coming along nicely, and we've even set foundations for a new one," continued another.

"Some of the damaged roads had to be torn up to fix, and they revealed problems with water irrigation that we didn't even know were there. We've managed to save quite a few neighborhoods from sinking into marshland."

"We've even started planting more trees around to help drain it, and people seem to like that."

"The air feels fresher."

"We've improved people's lives."

"In all honesty, Karl," an old woman spoke up, drapes of long silver hair curtaining her face. "I would be inclined to say that the fire did a lot more good to Kinoko than harm."

A murmur of approval ran through them all, and even George had to agree. The fire, started as a final act of defiance against the kingdom, had helped Kinoko thrive unlike it ever had before. George took a moment to wonder how that fact would make Sapnap feel.

"But it still doesn't hide the fact that it did harm," Karl said, cutting the rest of the Council off. "We have casualties, and precious things were lost."

The fire, while it was raging, had been destructive beyond belief, and no amount of trees planted over the ash could hide that fact. George understood where his friend was coming from, but had to purse his lips to not point out his unnecessary pessimism. The main point was that Kinoko Kingdom was holding up just fine, yet that was clearly not enough for Karl to crack a smile.

The leader turned to one of the members. "What about Sapnap? Has there been a sighting yet?"

George looked over at the general that had been appointed in Sapnap's place. He turned out to be the youngest of the elders, but still old enough to bear white streaks in his hair and wrinkles that creased his battle scarred face. George didn't like him: he acted too much like the fireborn. He was an almost-identical replacement, not an asset. This new general only served to prove that Kinoko Kingdom needed Sapnap, and simply tried to find someone like him to glue to his place. It didn't work, and it was a shallow move.

The general let out a low growl. "No sign, but do not worry. When we find him, we'll wring his miserable neck and string him up for all to see."

"No!" George suddenly blurted out, realizing his mistake too late.

The Council turned to face him, eyebrows knitted close together and veiny hands gripping canes. They stared at him with apprehension painted across their faces, and suspicious murmurs reached his ears. George wanted to sink backwards into the wall and never return, but he forced himself to stand up straight and raise his voice again.

"Maybe don't string him up," he added, conscious of the tremor in his tone, "it might scare everyone."

The general rolled his eyes, clearly annoyed at the insolence of the young, useless member of the Council. "That's the *point*."

"But it won't come to that," Karl interjected, "because Sapnap won't come anywhere near Kinoko, if he knows what's good for him that is."

George had spent a long time with Karl, but he still had a hard time understanding him. One moment, he'd be cursing out the very fireborn that George had seen stealing his heart a while back, and the next he'd slip into his friend's arms, mumbling "what ifs" and soft words that George knew were not meant for himself. Karl was conflicted when it came to Sapnap, that much was certain, and George could only do so much to help him through it.

He missed Sapnap too. He had known him for much, *much* longer than Karl, and yet he dealt with the pain in a much more composed way. He couldn't understand Karl's reaction. Maybe romantic love did that to some people. "Romantic", because he knew that true love wasn't necessarily just one between partners. Partners, friends, family, nations, objects... It was there in so many things. George only knew so little about it.

It was exciting and wonderful when it was there, and unbearable and tragic when it wasn't. He knew that, and so he told himself he knew enough.

"I asked you all here because I need an honest opinion on this."

Karl raised something up above his head, fanning it between his fingers. In the light of the fire that framed the sides, George could see a golden card. He tried to peer closer, along with the rest of the Council.

"Our eyes aren't what they used to be," an older man said, beckoning the leader closer. "It just looks like a red letter to all of us."

Red.

Ah fuck, not again.

George drew back, biting his tongue. Thankfully, he didn't have the courage to blurt out what he saw. He didn't want "colourblind" to worm its way into the long list of likely words the Council probably used to describe him behind his back. Everyone knew of his colour problem already, he just didn't want to remind them.

Karl came closer, holding the card out to the Council. "It's an invitation," he said, "from the Eggpire. They're planning a banquet and are requesting Kinoko's presence at the table."

At the mention of the Eggpire, words of concern began to ripple throughout the room. The Egg's influence hadn't reached Kinoko, but rumours and stories of its atrocities had. Even living peacefully away from its tendrils, the red growth and the power-drunk cult that followed it still struck fear into the Kinokians.

"The Eggpire sent it to you?" a man said, stepping forward.

The tip of his crooked cane pressed deep into the long white beard that trailed from his jaw to the floor. Gnarled fingers asked for the invitation, which Karl soon handed over before going to pace by the fireplace again. The Council huddled around the old man who bore the letter, pushing George out of the loop, as usual. He was used to it and kept back, eyes locked on Karl's hunched, pensive figure. Every time he passed the burning hearth, his long, cloaked shadow swallowed it all before moving on. It was hypnotizing in its own, dark way.

"Why did you decide to confer with us on this?" the older man asked as the crowd stopped scrutinizing the letter.

Karl stopped and looked at them all. "Because I want your opinion on the matter," he said. "Why else?"

"This seems more like a private matter than an important part of our nation's governing."

"See, that's where you're wrong."

George followed Karl with his eyes as the leader pocketed the invite again and addressed the Council as a whole. He stood with his hands on his hips and a lopsided, nervous smile, gesturing to the situation as if the answer he gave was obvious. It was, in a way, and George was satisfied to note that it seemed like his own brain worked faster than those of the other members present.

"So," Karl continued, "what do I do? Do I attend this formal evening or not?"

The old man spoke again, clearly the undesignated main speaker for the discussion that was going to follow. "They've invited only you by name," he said, pointing out a detail that otherwise would have gone unnoticed, "but they're also a dangerous power. What do *you* think?"

Karl shrugged, and sighed. "Someone with common sense would decline, but for diplomatic reasons, I think I should go." When the surprised talking began, he raised his hands for silence. "We've been absent from the other nations for too long, and they can't see us as weak. The fire is over, the traitor has been banished, and our kingdom is prospering. There's no reason we shouldn't attend."

"And yet, the Egg has caused too much destruction around the Greater SMP and the Badlands. Are you sure you want to risk your own neck for this?"

"If the Eggpire dares to hurt any of the leaders they've invited, then they know that their respective nations will rip them to shreds. They won't take that risk."

"You can't go alone," the old man said, creasing his aging forehead.

Karl waved dismissively towards a certain someone in the group. "I'll take George with me, then."

George suddenly felt everyone's eyes on him, and he stood up straighter. He stayed silent for a while, expecting them to start talking again, then soon realized they were waiting for an answer.

He nodded, feeling an anxious lump the size of an egg form and rise in his throat. "Uh, yeah. I'll go with Karl."

The smile he got back from his friend was warm and thankful, and yet George still felt unbelievably cold. "Not only will it be nice to go with a good friend, but George's time in power must have introduced him to a number of balls and banquets, which is more than I can say for myself!"

He followed up his explanation with a laugh, soon joined by a few scratchy-toned others. They were forced, and even made George even more uncomfortable.

So, that's what he was to the Council: a young, useless member, Karl's good friend, and a guide to high-society life and parties. What an existence.

He looked down in shame.

The meeting ended soon after, and George was out on the blustery cobbled streets of Kinoko Kingdom. He always found that there was something magical about Kinoko's quaint, little dappled mushroom houses at night, when the fireflies danced across the way and the glowstone lamps would illuminate the city with mellow warmth. And yet tonight, he paid no notice to them.

He was cold, so cold. Not even a slap to his arms or an extra layer of clothing could help. It was a freeze that spread through his mind, leaving his thoughts and his body numb, too numb to do or say anything worthwhile.

That was why he left the meeting soon after it was over, without even bidding anyone goodnight. His bed was calling him, as usual. It wasn't for sleep, in fact it rarely was these days. It was to help cleanse the grimy, gritty thoughts that harboured under his fair skin and refused to leave him alone.

Once a monarch, always a monarch. What an existence, to be cursed by a title he had never wanted in the first place. What an existence, what an existence. What an existence! It was almost laughable.

George closed his eyes as he kept walking, dazzled by the golden lights and wanting only to be rid of them. He hated gold, he hated silver, he hated riches. He wanted to

wallow in dark browns, forest greens and sky blues, or at least the shades he could see. He wanted simplicity, and peace. He wanted to be back on his farm again.

He wanted to go home. His *real* home.

He stopped in his tracks, drawing in a deep breath. The breeze was cold, but it was comforting. It caressed his skin and made it tingle and for a moment, he wanted nothing more than to waltz away in its clutches like a leaf.

He wanted peace, he wanted serenity, he wanted—

"Don't move," a sharp voice whispered beside his ear. The sharp, cool sting of a blade pressed into his side.

George gasped and wrenched his eyes open, holding in a scream. A scream that could never leave his mouth because of the hand and cloth pressed over it.

A sickening smell filled his nostrils as he inhaled the fine scent choking him senseless, and then he began to drift. First, his legs seemed to give up, slowly melting to the ground beneath him. Then, his arms and chest tugged down, begging to follow suite. His head rolled to the side, his eyes no longer able to open. His mind was the last one to go, lulling him into a simplistic, reassuring mindset he couldn't even focus on. He blacked out.

Peace. Serenity. Paralyzing fear.

He awoke on a soft bed. At least, he thought that's what it was. His head was spinning. He peeled himself up, the surface beneath him too hard to be his mattress. The dampness of the earth abruptly brought him back to his senses. The darkness was absolute, and it made a shiver run up his spine. He raised a weakened hand up, touching the scratchy blindfold that covered his eyes. He tried to take it off.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you."

George froze, the voice once whispering into his ear now echoing all around him. He stood up, dutifully keeping his eyes covered. He was still outside, he knew that much. The wind tousled his hair and crickets chirped in the distance. However, the ground beneath him was not the cobbles of Kinoko's streets. It was grassy and littered with little pebbles, or so the way his feet rolled and skidded told him. He couldn't see a thing, but he could hear. The night-time whispers dove into his brain in an overwhelming

symphony that wouldn't leave, almost bursting his skull wide open. Deprived of sight, he could do nothing but let them consume him.

His mouth was as dry as a desert and his chest stung with every breath. When he spoke, his voice came out small and squeaky, frightened beyond belief. He wasn't alone. He was being watched.

"Who's there?" he asked, trying to calm himself.

"Me."

"Who's 'me'?"

There was a moment before the voice replied. "Clay," it said, and George choked.

He choked on fear, on memories, and on the very air he breathed. Dream, here? In Kinoko Kingdom, or wherever he was? Near him. Watching him. So, so close to him...

Again, he could push out no more than a mere murmur. "You..."

"I want to talk to you," Dream said.

George bristled. Dream had escaped from prison. He had killed Sam. He had blanketed the entire land with terror, without even showing his face once: it was a talent only he could possess. He was a criminal, he was dangerous, and he was here. Right here. So close, once again.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say," George spat. "Leave."

"*George...*" The call of his name was gentle, and unbearably sweet.

There would only be two reasons why Dream would approach him the way he did, especially after fleeing from entire armies. The first one would be to place George on another throne, but his voice was too soft for that to be the reason. The second option however was by far the most alarming outcome, and incidentally the most heartbreaking.

George grit his teeth, staying impeccably still. "You don't love me anymore," he said, his tone cold and unforgiving. "You've made that abundantly clear."

"Gods... You're accusing me of no longer loving you when I that's all I've ever done."

A gentle hand lightly caressed the smooth skin of his shaved jaw. The touch was fleeting and so were the words, and yet George did not understand why they were tarnishing him with their warmth. He wanted to sink into every stroke and every syllable. He couldn't allow himself to, but his legs still tried to take him there.

He took a step forward, and his foot immediately hit something soft. It didn't feel like moss or a patch of mushrooms. Whatever it was stayed perfectly still, and if it was alive it would have moved by now.

If it was alive.

George could feel the colour drain from his face, and he sucked in a horrified breath. He stepped back, suddenly realizing his boot was sticky and slick with something slimy. It reeked of death.

"Stop moving," Dream said, his voice hovering once more over his shoulder.

"Please, can I take the blindfold off?" George asked, not knowing if he really wanted to or not.

Now he smelt it once, he smelt it everywhere: the wine of life drawn, snaking over the ground in sickly rivers. How many different springs were there? That was the most terrifying question.

"No."

The reply relieved him, but also only confirmed his fears. "What do you mean, "no"?"

"If you do, I'll have to kill you too."

George's words caught in his throat, and the horrors began to flash in front of his eyes. "Dream, what have you done—"

"We should take this opportunity to talk, alright? Just talk, without seeing each other."

"Without—" Still shaken by everything, George could no longer get his thoughts straight. "Dream, you're not making any sense!"

A laugh cut him off, light and endearing but striking dread into his soul. "It's adorable, isn't it?" his kidnapper hummed. "I can barely see you."

George yelled as soft fabric rustled against him, and a warm hand landed on his shoulder. Again, he could only try and imagine. He tried to picture a sinister grin on Dream's face, to no avail. It was impossible, and only a smile as soft as a moonbeam filled his mind.

"All you can imagine is a dark cloak, and all I see is the figure of a king, shining like the summer's sun. I am but a shadow, you are a blinding light. You have no idea what these past minutes have been like for me. I've never said what my heart has wanted me to say before, too caught up in the judgment of your gaze. I feel like we're speaking for the very first time, tonight."

"Your voice sounds... different."

A lot more soothing, a lot more genuine, and a lot more poetic. It was a combination that almost pushed George over the edge of melting into his words.

"Darkness is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Anything can happen and I... I..."

Dream began to falter, to George's surprise. This was the first time he had since George could remember, and it was frightening. Much more frightening than anything else he had heard or felt that night.

"Dream?" he whispered, swallowing down a bucketload of saliva.

There was a cough. "Where was I?" Droning mumbles began to buzz around his ears. "Being so honest to you is new to me. I'm scared."

George knew that wasn't a lie. It *couldn't* be a lie, because the tremor in his tone and his rapid breathing said it all. Dream was scared. Dream – fearless, cunning, dishonest Dream – was scared, and he had just admitted it.

"Scared of what?" George asked.

"Scared of being mocked as I reach up to the skies to give you a taste of the stars and instead settle for meager flowers."

They were plagiarized words, that George became more and more certain of as time went by. Nevertheless, they were working.

George shrugged, trying to banish the wishful thoughts of where the conversation was heading. "Flowers are nice," he said in a quiet voice.

"I despise them!" Dream exclaimed, shaking the world around them.

George cowered, wrapping his arms around himself and seeking solace in the darkness draped across his eyes. And yet...

"You've never spoken to me like this before."

Dream's tone softened again. "But I've thought about doing so for ages. In times of war, surrounded by quivers and flaming torches, we're inclined to try and focus on fresher things, like the waters of a spring or a breathtaking view. You were that escape, my escape."

You were mine too, once upon a time.

Before everything. Before L'Manberg, before the wars, before all the hate tainted them all beyond cleansing, beyond repair. Before George grew up, leaving behind the careless, carefree teenager that had chosen to run off with a strange boy one day. Before he stopped believing in fairytales. There were no handsome princes, a perfect love didn't exist and there were no happily ever afters. There was only reality, and George had accepted just how hard it really was to endure.

"Leave," he repeated, trying to push Dream away once again with only his words. One knew how to master them better than the other, however.

"Please George, I know what you think of me, but let the evening purge us both. I am no longer a fugitive, and you are no longer a king."

I never was.

"We are you and me, as we were and as we always have been. I have stolen this moment for us both, and I pity those who will not have the chance to have one like it."

"Stolen" was the only correct term for everything that was happening. Stolen, kidnapped even. The sleeping drugs still tainted George's nostrils and his mouth every time he inhaled or slid his tongue over his dry, cracked lips.

Dream went on. "I feel that a noble love exists between us; a nobility where every beautiful word we say brings tragedy along with them."

A tragedy, an unhappy ending. Not the best outcome, but at least it would end.

"Fine, a moment," George said tentatively. "Let's pretend this is a moment; I'm not blindfolded, we're not at war, and I can see you. What would you say to me?"

His hands were grabbed suddenly, and a head was pressed against his stomach. A smooth, rounded surface dug into his clothes, and George shivered as the smile of his mask came to greet him in his mind.

"Words, all of them!" Dream cried. "All those that dare come to me, and I will throw them at your feet, wild and free, without stringing them into garlands! I love you so much that it stifles me! I love you, I'm mad, I can't bear it, it's too much! Everytime I see you, I tremble, and the bell in my heart chimes, singing your name!"

George could do nothing but stay silent and listen, hands shackled in a grasp he could not tell was desperate or loving. He could do *nothing*, except hold himself together, and stop himself from slipping into the small, destructive and treacherous headspace he held in a corner of his head.

Dream's hand squeezed his tighter, drawing out a muffled cry of pain. "Can't you understand what I'm feeling? Can you not feel my soul in the shadows, reaching for your ear?"

Before long, the hands were dropped and big, warm arms were wrapped around his waist, the other's head and shattered mask still buried deep into his stomach.

"I can feel you shake and quake as I do, like a leaf between the branches of a tree. You understand me, and you feel the same, I know you do. And with that knowledge, all I can do now is die happily."

George snapped. Tears pouring down his cheeks, he did all he could to push Dream off him, and began to panic when he realized his strength was nothing against the bone-crushing grip of his bonds.

"You're poisoning me," George gasped, instead moving his hands up to his throat. Gulps, screams and unspoken confessions snaked down his esophagus, clogging it as they went and drawing only more tears of pain.

"Then let death come. I'm the one who brought it down upon you."

Dream's reply was chilling, but it was made of velvet. No matter how hard George tried to fight it – any of it, everything that was happening – it served only as a pointless, uphill

battle. If the warrior was right, if death was about to claim him, then George hoped it would do so quickly. Quickly and cleanly, sparing him from whatever this was.

Then all of a sudden, everything stopped. The bonds loosened and fell, and the cries were hushed. Dream's presence had all but disappeared and for a brief moment, George sighed and relaxed in the knowledge that the nightmare was over. That it was all fake.

But the smell was still there, that sickening stench of death. It made George gag so violently that he was certain his throat had been sprained. It burned, it burned too much to be imaginary.

He called out. "Dream?"

No reply, except for the howling midnight wind. Still blinded, he listened carefully for any sign of life around him. Even the crickets had stopped their chirping. The world was still, and George finally removed the blindfold.

The moon was bright, bathing the forest clearing in a pale, milky glare and casting long shadows across the treeline and everything that was held within: George, and the carnage resting at his feet. Dozens of bodies, ranging from Kinoko soldiers to citizens, lay in lakes of dirty gold that trickled across the grass and pooled at George's feet. He stayed frozen to his spot, unable to move or drag his eyes away from the scene. Men, women, children and all in-between, slaughtered and cut down by clean, dark streaks across their necks. It was pure savagery, and yet the work was cleaner than any battlefield. This massacre – the only way to describe such a scene – that had befallen Kinoko Kingdom was once again a tragedy courtesy of one of his two closest friends. Fire and blood, so close together. Even the flowers and trees seemed to be weeping at the sight, wilting and losing their leaves.

It had to be a nightmare, a terrible vision, but the footprints set in the dirt ground leading away from George and the large rustle in the underbrush said otherwise.

"I'll have to kill you too."

If George had disobeyed Dream's words and had taken off the blindfold, he would have met the same fate. He would have bled out in the middle of a clearing for having set eyes on a monster's whereabouts.

Dream would've killed him, and yet from the sharp ache in his heart, George had a feeling he had already done that, thanks to the only weapons more painful than blades.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Where I Lost You

"So, laddie, where are ye off to exactly?"

Velvet turned around as the ship's captain limped over to him with his leg brace, hitting the wooden deck with rhythmic *thunks*. He turned back out to the sea, resting his arms on the wooden rails of the galleon.

"I told you already, sir," he replied. "The Greater SMP."

"No, I mean really." The man settled beside him, the smoke from his pipe wafting into Velvet's face.

He coughed. "Really, I am."

"Then yer a foolish kid. No one just *goes* to the SMP anymore. There ain't no difference between that place and Hell anymore..."

"I have a good reason to," Velvet said, determined. "A very good reason."

"Is that reason worth dyin' for?"

With no hesitation, he nodded. "Absolutely. I'd lose every single one of my lives for this."

The captain looked at him and raised an eyebrow, then stuck the end of his pipe back between his teeth. "Then I hope it's worth it," he mumbled, puffing out a smoke ring and watching it disappear into the sky above them. "For yer sake and yer mother's, laddie, I hope it's worth it..."

A seagull screeched from its perch on the crow's nest, then dove down towards the ocean and began to make a bee-line to an unknown point in the distance. The morning mist began to clear, and Velvet managed to spy the edge of a dock slowly crawling into view, followed by rows of homes sitting against walls of rugged grey stone. The few

other boats and embarcations stationed along the coast were silent, rocking gently against the waves and creaking ominously in the silence. Their wood was dark, slimy and wet, making them look like black ghost-ships.

Velvet was transfixed, but not in a pleasant way. "It's so quiet," he whispered. Too quiet for a supposedly prospering harbour. The entire place looked like a ghost town.

The captain let out a chuckle too dark to be comforting. "Changed yer mind yet, laddie?"

Velvet shook his head. No matter what this place was ready to throw at him or scare him with, he wouldn't leave until he had at least glimpsed who he came to see.

"Didn't think so." The older man stared out at the docks once again as the crew rushed to bring the ship safely in between the piers. "Yer right; too quiet. I guess releasin' a crazed madman from jail does that to places."

Velvet had heard about what happened, of course. Rumours flew faster than some ships, carried on the wings of birds and in the mouths of travellers, but in all honesty, he couldn't care less.

The captain tipped the rest of his tobacco into the sea and pocketed his pipe, then tapped Velvet's shoulder. "I'll pay ye handsomely if you help me and me crew unload. Gods know ye'll need the money here."

So Velvet did, his mind swimming as he hauled barrels upon barrels and crates upon crates down the slippery bridge and onto the docks.

He was here in the Greater SMP, finally. After months and months of unexpected and ridiculous setbacks – further strengthening the theory that an otherworldly force was messing with his fate – he had managed to find a safe passage on a cargo ship. He hadn't told Antfrost about his journey; in fact, he had stopped writing entirely when the cat's letters no longer came back to him. The first time, Velvet didn't worry as much as he should have. Ant was a leader of a nation now! *His* Antfrost! He was probably busy, and the years he had spent writing to him incessantly must have been incredibly time-consuming.

However, when the weeks dragged on and on with no news, he began to worry. Was there a hiccup in the postal systems? Was Ant simply far too busy? Was he dead? Or even worse, had he found someone else and had forgotten about Velvet entirely? Whatever it was, it wasn't normal in the slightest, and Velvet had to come and see for

himself. He had to check on Ant in person without having to rely on written words and scented envelopes.

The money he was paid for his help with the cargo was a surprisingly decent amount, and rounded up his total of year-long savings to a handsome balance. It was at least enough to stay in these realms for a few months in relative luxury, he thought.

He *hoped*, because he had made the solemn vow that he wouldn't leave the SMP without Antfrost by his side. They had been apart for far too long, and he would do anything to make sure they were never so ever again.

Until then, he had to somehow get settled in and find his bearings in the strange new land he knew only from stories and letters. Unfortunately, the streets were bare, save for a couple of nervous looking citizens darting through the shadows. When Velvet would try to talk to them, they looked startled, and quickly waved him away before moving on. Everyone he turned to shut him out.

Truly alone, he wandered a little further, until he saw a slightly more hopeful sight: a wooden sign jutting out from a building, creaking on its hinges.

The Catmaid

The lights were on, shining through the windows, and a delicious smell wafted from under the door. Velvet wasn't one to usually frequent inns – who knew what kind of shady creatures one could meet in there? – but since this one was by far the most welcoming place he could see, he tried his luck and pushed open the door.

There was a definite contrast between the outside world and the one on the inside. The door acted as a portal, cutting the grey, tragic harbour from the warm and inviting inn on the other side. One was dreary and lifeless; the other was full to the brim with merrymakers and heavy drinkers. In a time where a dangerous criminal had escaped, Velvet would have expected everyone to either be barricaded in their homes or congregating in secret rooms to come up with a potential plan to save their nations, but no. It seemed that a good portion of the civilians preferred to drown their sorrows instead. He looked around quickly, peering between the sweating bodies to make sure Antfrost was not one of them.

"Can I help you?" a gruff voice asked.

Velvet spun around, and certainly didn't expect what he saw. A well-built man with a thick brown beard stood in front of him, carrying a tray and dressed in a white and blue

maid outfit that was noticeably a size too small for him. A fake tail drooped out behind him, sweeping the floor and looking decidedly worse for wear, the little bell sewed to the end tinkling whenever a customer knocked it.

Velvet looked him up and down briefly, before giving a nervous little bow of greetings. "I was just wondering if you'd have a room for the night," he asked, trying not to distract himself with the pair of cat ears sitting atop the newcomer's head.

The catmaid shook his head. "We don't rent here," he replied.

"Oh, well... Can I at least have a drink, and a meal?"

"Of course! Find a spot, and I'll be right with you!"

Velvet sighed in relief, thankful. "Thank you."

He began to look around for a free table, and eventually spotted one hidden in a back corner. He scooted his way through the crowds and the maze of thick tobacco smoke, and made himself a little more at home. He took off his pack and put it down, looping the straps around his leg just in case someone fancied a quick grab at his things. He removed his hood, and unravelled the scarf around his neck.

As he did, he looked at the design fondly. It was white, speckled with clumsily crocheted cherries. When wrapped around him, looked like the soft icing Velvet would squeeze on top of pastries.

"For the sweetest of cakes," Antfrost had purred when he first gave it to him, visibly and ridiculously proud of his handiwork.

Velvet had put it on immediately, and took the opportunity to get his partner even more flustered. "Are you saying I'm tasty?" he murmured in a low voice, winking.

The cat had sat there, speechless, with wide eyes and a nervously flicking tail. Needless to say, that night had ended somewhere a lot more comfy, where Velvet knew he had proved his point.

Before he could slip into another, agonizing headspace, Velvet stored the scarf safely inside his bag, just in time for the catmaid to appear once again with a set of cutlery. Velvet looked at him again as he set the table. He wasn't the cat he was looking for, but he was still partially a cat, and that reassured him, somewhat.

"So, you need a place to stay?"

Now they were out of the thick of the crowd, Velvet could hear him much better, and his voice wasn't as gruff and gravelly as it first seemed. In fact, it was quite the opposite, and he allowed himself to relax a lot more.

"Yes," he replied, "at least for a while."

"How long exactly?"

Velvet took a moment to answer and when he did, it came out unsure. "I don't know. As long as it takes me to wrap up my business here."

"Well," the catmaid hummed, elegantly brushing something off the table, "there's a guy who owns a hotel nearby I could maybe ask. He owes me a favour anyway."

Again, Velvet relaxed, and he smiled. "Thank you, Mister—?"

"HBomb," the other replied, then laughed. "I know, it's an odd name. I wanted to change it to *"Love Bomb"* but something tells me that could bring about its own complications, don't you think? That's the vibe I'm getting from these guys."

He jabbed a thumb at the rest of the inn's guests, resting his other hand on the edge of the table. Velvet politely peered behind him, then leaned back in his seat.

"Don't get me wrong," HBomb said, "they're lovely, but a bit of a handful sometimes. I wouldn't worry too much tonight though, don't worry."

"How come?"

"Oh, they keep talking about the same thing over and over, left and right. The Red Banquet, the Red Banquet! Here, there and everywhere!" He made a yapping gesture with his hand, rolling his eyes. "If I hear about it one more time, I think I'll start putting on my cat claws."

"What's wrong about the Red Banquet?" Velvet asked, curious to know about at least something that was happening in this godsforsaken place.

The catmaid feigned polishing Velvet's empty glass. "Oh, nothing. Nothing..." he mumbled. A moment later, he slammed it back down and leaned in closer to his customer. "Except the fact that everyone has their heads up their own asses when it comes to it!"

Velvet suddenly realized that he had fallen into a deep trap he could not wriggle his way out of: the "bartender's" talk. It was too late to escape now, and so he just politely listened as HBomb went on his rant.

"They say they're looking for potential waiters, so you know what? I go and volunteer! I've got the experience, I own my own thriving business, and I'm enthusiastic! Surely that would be enough, but no! Turns out, I'm "*not the right fit*" and that they're "*looking for someone with a little more decorum*" !" He made quotation marks in the air, then slammed his hands on his hips. "A little more *decorum*? I bet they just don't want another cat turning up to the event!"

Another cat? That struck Velvet's interest, and he leaned in closer.

"I mean, look at me!" the catmaid continued, fondly stroking his tail. "I'm magnificent! How dare they ignore me like pussies, especially since the Badlands' literal *pussycat* was the one to send me away! That's discrimination!"

"Wait, the Badlands' pussycat?"

Could it be...?

"Yeah, Antfrost. He's one of the Badlands' leaders, don't you know? You can't miss him, he's got beautiful fur." He combed his hair back with a wistful sigh and peered at Velvet under heavily painted eyes. "You alright?"

Velvet was shaken, to say the least. Shaken, but euphoric. One random turn down a street had brought him to The Catmaid and its patron, who had practically dropped Ant's location and wellbeing right into his lap. He was one step closer to reuniting with him.

He leaned towards HBomb, determined. "And the Badlands organized this banquet?" he checked.

"Yeah, they did."

"How can I get in?"

"It's an invite only sort of event, but they gave me a couple "complimentary" ones when they disgracefully cast my beautiful body aside."

"Could I have one?"

HBomb looked at Velvet up and down. "You're not from around these parts, are you?" he asked. He seemed hesitant.

"No, I'm not, but I came here for a good reason. Could I please have an invite?"

"Why?"

Velvet was definitely not about to tell this stranger his whole life story, so he got to the persuasive point. "I'll slap Antfrost for you," he offered.

"Done!" The catmaid grinned ear to ear, the little bells on his outfit tinkling wildly. He smoothed down his dress, and prepared to walk off. "I'll bring that to you along with today's special, if that's what you'd fancy?"

"Perfect, thank you." Velvet smiled back, genuinely this time. Finally, he was getting somewhere. He knew exactly where to find Antfrost in less than a day of arriving on the shores of the SMP.

The Red Banquet was calling his name.

"So, Tubbo! How's it going?"

Silence.

"No, no, that's too relaxed. Um... Nice weather we're having in Snowchester, isn't it?"

Again, a silence fell, followed by the unimpressed sniff of a raccoon.

"That's dumb, isn't it, Nook? Fucking dumb." The boy stopped in his tracks, and held up his hand in a greeting. "*What's up, you little shit?* Wait, what am I doing? Absolutely not!"

Tommy cursed himself loudly, stamping his foot against the cold cobbles and shivering against the Northern wind. The snowflakes continued to fall, urging him to seek shelter before he caught a cold. He couldn't care less. He still kept walking. The burning eyes of Snowchester's inhabitants fell on his back, but they did nothing to warm him up. If anything, they only made him colder, and he shot back with glacial stares of his own. They were staring like they'd never seen him before. Months had passed since his revival, and yet it still seemed that half of the SMP's populations still hadn't got the message. They were late, and sorely needed to get with the program.

Idiots.

Tommy had been to Snowchester only once, and honestly didn't wish to set a single foot there again. Too cold, too snowy and too arctic. It also served as a constant reminder of what his friends had accomplished without him, and that would never sit right.

Today, however, he was desperate. After so many night terrors, nightmares of Dream lurking around every corner and vivid hallucinations of a bloodied trident grasped in his hand, Tommy was finally brave enough to come back and confront some phantoms. *One* phantom. He needed a friend.

Not that Sam Nook wasn't one, far from it, but Tommy just needed *this* particular friend. He always did, but he was often far too stubborn to admit it. The raccoon was still settled around his shoulders like a big furry scarf that gave him a little bit of comfort.

Finally, the house he had been looking for rose in front of him. It looked the exact same as all the other homes around it, and yet it still sat apart. Maybe it was because Tommy knew who actually lived there. He stopped for a moment, one hand on the frozen handrail.

He could run away right now if he wanted to. He could escape back to his hobbit hole and dive under his blankets. He could face everything alone, just as he always had done. He didn't need anything or anyone: he could cope quite well on his own.

A sharp jab to his heart suddenly pulled him back to reality, and he resigned himself. With Sam Nook tickling his ears with small, warm breaths, he climbed up the slippery stairs, walked across the small porch, and knocked on the door.

Time seemed to stop for a moment, a tense moment where Tommy could do nothing but wait and try to channel his shaking.

Then, the door opened with a creak, and Tubbo stood on the threshold, glowing a golden brown in the warm light of his home.

Tommy's tongue tied as soon as he lay eyes on him. He tried to focus on Sam Nook's weight around his shoulders, trying to melt into an escape he was so accustomed to. It didn't work, not this time.

He opened his mouth to speak, only just noticing the small white streak in Tubbo's hair.

Revival is shit, don't talk about it. Revival is shit, don't talk about it—

"Hi." He immediately bit his tongue.

What was that? What the *fuck* was that? "Hi" never solved anything, and it never would.

Tubbo blinked up at him, unreadable and impassive. It was like staring into the eyes of a stranger. "Hey," he said back.

Tommy could hear the little, nervous tapping of his hooves against the doorstep. He shifted, uncomfortable, and tried to look at Sam Nook for moral support. Instead, all he got was a mouthful of the raccoon's tail, and he couldn't turn his head without looking too suspicious or panicked.

"Tommy," Tubbo called to him, "are you alright?"

Apart from the anxiety of confronting his best friend after so long, the revival, Sam's death haunting him relentlessly and the trauma of his past experiences? Yeah, no, he was feeling great!

"Listen," the golden-haired boy finally pushed out with a huff. "I've got some shit to get off my chest, so do you want to go and throw some eggs at Jack Manifold with me?"

He closed his mouth and crossed his arms against the bitter, snowy air. He was shivering from something other than the cold, however. His breath curled out from between his lips, and he sneezed. A quick, chattery sentence from Sam Nook told him that the animal was disciplining him for not walking into Snowchester better prepared.

Dumb raccoon. He didn't mean it, not in the slightest. He was just too on edge to focus on anything else.

"I'll get my coat."

Startled, Tommy looked down. Tubbo smiled back. He *smiled*, and the boy felt like he was about to burst with joy for the first time in ages.

It was strained at first. How could it not be: since their last argument, two deaths and two respective revivals had taken place, as well as a whole lot of geopolitical tension and grief in-between. There was no way anything could go back to normal, at least not straight away.

And yet, they made it work, as they always did.

They started out by stealing an ungodly amount of eggs from Eret's palace kitchens, that Tommy knew worryingly well how to sneak into and navigate undetected. Then, with two wicker baskets hanging from each of their arms, they headed towards the Big Innit Hotel, where they began to lob their projectiles at the walls and windows. Unfortunately, Jack Manifold emerged too late for them to throw one at him, so they simply ran when they were spotted.

Laughing like children, they rushed down the Prime Path, completely ignoring the surprised cries of people who thought them both to be dead.

"Aren't you going to try and get the hotel back from him at some point?" Tubbo panted as they veered off into the forest.

Laughing loudly at the top of his lungs, finally thankful to be alive, Tommy shook his head. "That Jack-ass can keep it for all I care," he replied, keeping his eyes trained on Sam Nook as the animal scampered through the greenery. He had no use for it anymore, not since...

He slowed down suddenly, pinned down by thoughts he tried so hard to forget that day. The sadness continued to eat at him, as it had for a good while now, with no one to comfort him apart from a raccoon.

Tubbo stopped beside him. "Hey, Big Man," Tommy heard him call, snapping two fingers in front of his dazed face. "You alright? Why did we stop?"

No one to comfort him, except perhaps Tubbo, who he had missed more than he could ever or would ever care to admit. The boy snapped out of his thoughts, and Sam faded to the back of his mind.

Where he belongs, he thought, attempting to persuade himself that oblivion was the only way to stomach what he had done.

"Yeah, I'm fine! I was just, uhh..." He looked around them quickly, then pointed up at a random oak tree. "Wondering if we should build a treehouse up there." He glanced over at the young ram, nervous. "What do you think?"

"Hmmm..."

Oh gods, was Tubbo seeing right through his façade? Were the awkward questions about to pour out of him to the point that Tommy would simply snap and lash out? He was waiting, throat tight.

Tubbo moved his pointed arm a little across. "I think that one's sturdier," he said with a smile.

Tommy deflated like a balloon, sharing a relieved glance with Sam Nook when Tubbo went off to try and salvage some useful tools. Ever supportive, the raccoon gave him a little thumbs up, and the boy felt like he had finally accomplished something worthwhile. Before they had actually started work on the treehouse that is.

For the rest of that afternoon, they set up shop in the middle of the forest. Armed with hammers, saws, ropes and pots of suspiciously smelling paint (that could likely have been out of date), they spent their time putting together a little shack that they hauled up into the branches of a nearby tree. Everything was done in relative silence, but whenever their gazes crossed, a grin or a laugh would follow.

Tubbo's were genuine, or so it seemed to Tommy, but his own sounded forced to him, only making his heart beat faster and his sweat run in abundance. He couldn't ruin this, not now.

The treehouse finally started to take shape – or at least, some sort of shape. Sam Nook – the furry pawed, co-architect for the great Big Innit Hotel – held his head in his hands at the less than secure handiwork the two boys managed to produce. Looking at the finished product, Tommy finally understood why Wilbur would put him and Tubbo on any other duty in L'Manberg that didn't require any construction. But then again, after brushing a few thick and pattern-less streaks of bright paint onto the sides, their little treehouse started to look nice and cosy. In fact, when night fell and the fireflies began to drift between the numerous holes in the walls and roof, it looked more inviting than ever, and they couldn't wait to huddle up inside.

The floor creaked when they clambered in and sat down. The structure swayed when the winds blew, but other than that they felt safe.

Sitting cross-legged in the light of the fireflies, much more beautiful than any lantern, Tommy realized that their head-to-head talk could no longer be avoided. In true Tommy fashion, he could have jumped into it head-on.

Then again, baby steps needed to be taken.

Baby steps, and nothing more than those.

"Here," he said, holding something out in front of him. He had rushed back to his home to collect a couple of blankets and whatever else their den could need, and found it lying in a chest. Perhaps it was finally time to give it back to its rightful owner.

Tubbo's face lit up, and he reached for the stuffed toy. "My bee!" he exclaimed, squeezing it in both hands.

He flipped it over and began to trace the faded green thread that spelt his name on its belly. Tommy smiled, wishing he could tell his friend how often he had done the exact same thing.

"I found it today," he lied, "I don't know how it got in my house."

"I was wondering where it went!" Tubbo laughed, giving the bee a tight hug.

It might have seemed stupid, but Tommy was jealous of it. It was only a lifeless stuffed toy after all, but his heart began to ache just a little, and his grip tightened around Sam Nook's little fuzzy body. As the raccoon fought to free himself, the boy watched the young ram carefully, and the way he handled his newly found plushie.

Something seemed different about the way he cradled it, and the way he hunched his small frame. It was protectiveness, sure, but it wasn't the clumsy or childish one Tommy had last remembered seeing. The way Tubbo was handling his bee now almost made the boy think that there was a living baby in his arms, Michael perhaps? It was the hug of an adult, a caring adult. Tubbo had grown up. Tommy looked down at himself and at the way he was near suffocating Sam Nook in his grasp. He realized that he still had a long way to go.

He watched Tubbo as he hugged the stuffed toy again: warm and caring, with a strong grip nonetheless. Sam used to give him hugs like that once, when Tommy allowed him to that is. He missed them. He missed *him*.

Him, him, him.

Tommy got angry at himself. Why was it always about *him*? He was dead, so why couldn't the memories and every conflicting emotion Tommy felt just fucking die with him in Pandora's Vault? Why was he being haunted? The wind mocked his inner turmoil, and he grit his teeth.

"Is this a little childish?" Tubbo suddenly said out loud.

Tommy focused back on him. "What is?"

"All this! I mean, we're wrapped in blankets, huddled inside our crappy treehouse with our stuffed toys and eating cookies!"

As if to prove a point, the bee boy stuck his hand into the small bag of treats Tommy had dug out of his pantry and withdrew a chocolate chip cookie. He began munching happily, smiling with a mouth full of crumbs. Tommy followed his lead, a lot more relaxed once the comforting taste of chocolate touched his tongue. He thought for a moment, chewing carefully.

"So what?" he finally said, his words surprising even himself. "We're still kids aren't we? Let's live like it."

"But it's weird, isn't it?" Tubbo said. "Just a year or two more and we'll be adults. Do you think anything will change when we turn eighteen?"

"Why would it?" Tommy replied sharply, darkened thoughts once more plaguing him. "We're fucking treated like adults anyway, when it's convenient for others, at least. *"You're too young to understand!" "You're old enough to take responsibility!"* They need to make up their fucking mind!"

"I mean between us."

Tommy paused, cookie hovering in mid-air. It suddenly didn't seem so appetizing anymore, and he fed the rest to Sam Nook. He forced himself to break off the smallest of crumbs, if only to occupy his hands and to try and hide his uncertainty.

"Oh no, you're silent," Tubbo chuckled, "that means something's up."

"So much has already changed between us," Tommy ventured, deliberately ignoring Sam Nook's request to *just give him the whole treat already!*

The familiar strain between them had returned. Tommy could feel it in the air, like a growing thunder. Normally, he would want to be the lightning, cracking across the sky and initiating chaos.

No, not this time. *Baby steps, baby steps.*

After what felt like hours, Tubbo finally spoke up again. Still looking away, Tommy couldn't see his expression. "Well, I know *that*," the young ram mumbled. "It's hard to ignore."

"I'm sorry, Tubbo," Tommy blurted out all of a sudden, the mere mention of change bringing him back to their last argument so long ago. "I didn't mean anything I said, I was angry, and I—"

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Tommy, for you or me. We both did some shitty and said some awful things, and not all of them can be forgiven."

Tommy couldn't say that he blamed him in the slightest, but it still stung like a nettle leaf rubbed against his palms.

And yet, ever the joker, he forced out a laugh. "In that case, I don't forgive you, Tubbster," he said.

"Then I don't forgive you either, Big Man," Tubbo replied and when the boy raised his head, he saw that his friend was smiling.

That one, shared grin was all that Tommy needed to see to know that he was on the right track. Not a touch was shared; no hugs, no hand holding or high-fives. It wasn't needed, for their expressions of non-forgiveness and sloppy, childish smiles were enough. They lay down on the hard wooden planks, their blankets drawn over them. Tommy glanced up at the ceiling, where a particularly large hole stared back. It appeared that they had forgotten to patch up a few sides, but that was alright. The treehouse was sturdy yet imperfect, just like their bond.

"I love you," Tubbo whispered softly.

"I love you too." Tommy felt warm again, much warmer than he ever was before. "Do you... do you think we can go back to what we used to be?" Immediately after he said that, he bit his tongue, regret flowing through him.

Tubbo shrugged. "I think it'll take a little time, but yeah, we can do it. I believe in us."

"Poggers," Tommy smiled. "Fucking poggers..."

He ended with a sigh, watching the stars appear in the dark night sky. Silence consumed them in its embrace, and the boy was almost prepared to fall asleep. He finally felt truly sleepy, unfazed by the prospect of insomnia or night terrors. With Tubbo at his side, he could overcome anything.

"I need to go." Tubbo shuffled after a while, and got up.

"Oh, right..." Tommy stayed where he was, lying on the wooden floor of the treehouse and peeking at the stars through the cracks in the roof.

He had almost forgotten that Tubbo had a life outside of him. He had a kid, a new nation, and whatever the fuck was going on between him and Ranboo. Tommy had been liberated after the fall of L'Manberg but now... He had nothing, except perhaps the quaint treehouse, his discs, a chocolate-coloured raccoon and all the time in the world, now used to patiently wait for someone to notice him again. And yet, even with so few things already, he was losing more and more with each passing day. Losing, but also gaining. He was living life again.

As the rope ladder creaked, he spoke up. "Goodnight."

Tubbo stopped his descent and before Tommy knew it, the tattered face of a stuffed bee was affectionately smushed against his and Sam Nook's faces.

"Goodnight," his friend whispered. There was a small thud as he dropped to the floor, and more rustles as he trotted away. "I'll see you tomorrow! Maybe you can come and visit Snowchester again!"

"Yeah, sure." Tommy didn't even know if his reply had been heard or not.

He hadn't moved from his spot, still staring aimlessly up at the sky. He stroked the two things hanging around his neck: his green bandana, and his compass. Both pieces of Tubbo that he cherished just as equally as each other.

The night's frozen air had really started to settle in, and Tommy wondered if he should perhaps return to his earthy home and the warm bed that awaited him there. He decided against it. Maybe a night under the stars, lying on a hard wooden floor, was just what he needed. So he grabbed Tubbo's discarded blanket, fashioned himself a makeshift pillow, and pulled his own cover over him, preparing for a long, long night. Sam Nook was already fast asleep against his side, curled up like a cat. Tommy scratched him behind his ears.

Two pieces of Tubbo, and one of Sam. That wasn't so bad.

In the small square of the nocturnal sky that he could see, the stars shimmered brightly, tangling with the fireflies like one massive, sparkling web. Tommy crossed his arms behind his head, and began to count them.

"One, two, three..."

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Fit For Kings

Sam had a term he used every so often: "roses".

It didn't have anything to do with botany, but the plant was central to his metaphor. The "roses" were those, usually close to his heart, that he would not only happily lose life and limb to protect, but that could easily defend themselves as well. Soft and gentle-looking on the outside, but armed with sharp blades that could draw blood just as easily as a rose's thorns could.

Puffy was a prime example: a soft, motherly sheep who had built up a fearsome reputation on the high seas and fought as boldly and as mercilessly as legendary warriors in the heat of battle.

Tommy was one as well, and Tubbo too: two kids who had accomplished the impossible and been through hell more times than many would in their entire lifetime. They ran revolutions, countries and so much more, still managing to rise up throughout everything. Not only that, Tommy had a sharp tongue and wit that must have been burdened on him by Wilbur. He wasn't an easy soldier to take down.

Ranboo was a rose in Sam's eyes as well: he may have lacked courage for a long time and was more terrified of others than people were of him, but he was so much stronger than he thought.

And Bad was there too: a friendly demon with a sweet-tooth and a strict no-swearing rule, who— well, if he wasn't unbelievably powerful in his own way, then the Eggpire would have fallen a long, long time ago.

Now, there was also someone else.

Nikki, now he started to get to know her better, was quickly becoming another rose to add to the bunch. Soft-spoken and bubbly, always smiling and ready to help with the smallest things. Like Sam, she was good with her hands and used them to bake, sew and arrange the most beautiful flower bouquets. All in all, on the outside, she seemed like a gentle, pink-haired doe. The only rough edges of her character were the ones of the tattered coat around her shoulders. It smelt faintly of gunpowder.

But Sam knew what she could be like in action. In the midst of a battle, she was vicious, regularly crushing Ranboo in friendly training duels and even almost beating Sam a couple of times. She fought in the L'Manberg revolution, the Pet Wars, against Schlatt's reign of terror, and when the time finally came she set fire to the last hope L'Manberg ever had of rising again.

Nikki was a sugary but tough cookie. Nikki was a rose, one of which by any other name would smell just as sweet. She was loved for her soft petals, and blessed with her thorns. In this case, one of her thorns was a needle, and she was currently digging it painfully into Sam's side.

He flinched, "Ow."

He felt Nikki roughly push his arm up, and gentle fingers fiddle with a seam or two. "Stop moving, and maybe you won't get hurt," she tutted.

Sam sighed and tried to stay as still as he could. He certainly tried, but he didn't like it in the slightest: it reminded him way too much of the rigid stances he'd take as the Warden. He moved again, and the needle pierced his side once more.

This time, he grit his teeth, even as Nikki prodded him afterwards. "What did I just say?"

"Stop moving," he echoed, glancing down at her.

The girl's hibiscus-pink hair was tied back into a messy bun, giving him a good view of the golden thread she held between her teeth, as well as the deep concentration in her eyes as she adjusted the white linen shirt he wore. It was only part of what he was expecting to wear that evening, and to him the details didn't matter. Before today, he wasn't one to usually go out of his way to dress up for any special occasions – if there were any, that is. The last time he had was when the Badlands tried to entice Eret into giving them their land, and it didn't go to plan.

But in all honesty, once Nikki had shown him what she had sewed in such a short time, he was ready to put it on with no fuss and not burden her any more. *She* was the one who insisted on making sure everything fit correctly, to which he reluctantly agreed. After all, he *didn't want to cause any fuss*. That didn't mean he enjoyed being pampered in any case, or standing perfectly still as a needle impaled him.

But Nikki seemed to be enjoying herself, gently humming soft tunes as she worked. Sam's admiration for her went far past all bounds of reason. She could fight, bake the most delicious pastries he had ever tasted, butter up a hardened warrior like

Technoblade with a single hug and now sew an entire outfit that was quite honestly fit for the finest of nobles.

He moved again, this time deliberately so that she looked up at him. He smiled. "Is there anything you can't do?"

She raised her eyebrow, then smiled back at him and giggled. "Clearly, get you to stay still," she teased, then pulled his hand down. The sleeves were a little baggy, on purpose he realized, and she adjusted the cuffs. "You're almost done."

"Thank you," he sighed, relieved to finally see the light at the end of the fabric tunnel. "You've done an amazing job."

"I wouldn't say amazing," she hummed, taking a step back and looking him up and down. "I wasn't sure I got the measurements right. You're so tall."

Height-wise, she reached a little under his shoulder. The difference wasn't *that* extreme, but Sam could understand her awe — just a little bit. "Well, then Techno and Ranboo must be giants," he laughed.

"They are!" she replied, also laughing. "I'm so glad I'm fighting on *their* side of the battlefield now!"

Why *wasn't* she fighting against them, anyway? That was a question that was still swimming inside Sam's mind ever since he first watched her turn up at the Commune, and later in the Syndicate. He finally found the time and motivation to voice it aloud.

"Why did you join the anarchists anyway?" he asked her.

He wasn't an *anarchist* himself, as such: just because he wanted to see some powers fall didn't mean that he was against all governments. The Badlands were still very much dear to him, and he often dreamed of the day he'd be able to freely run and look after them once more. When the Egg was gone for good, perhaps. He wouldn't have long to wait if that's what he expected to happen. Nikki herself had an intimate history with L'Manberg, having been part of it since its beginnings. He doubted she was a complete anarchist too.

The girl paused before answering, walking up to him and tugging a bit of the shirt at the back. "I think you know why," she answered.

Sam had a good idea, yes. "But that can't be all," he probed, "if everyone who wronged their nation joined secret societies, the Commune would be crawling with people."

"Remember to clean your boots," Nikki said, pointing down at his feet.

As soon as he bent down to look, she reached up and tied a white silk scarf around his neck. It was so painfully similar to the ones that Sam was forced to wear as a kid, when his parents would drag him and his siblings along to high-society balls he had no wish to be a part of. Now he was flung back in a similar situation, and buried memories began to resurface from the depths he had cast them into so long ago. The only difference was that this glamorous evening would actually amount to something, and so for one night, Sam was ready to bear the formalities.

He focused back on Nikki. "You still haven't answered my question," he reminded her.

She finished tying the scarf into a mail coach knot, and finally looked back up at him. "It's nice to know I have friends in many places," she said, brushing what he assumed was a speck of grime off his shoulder. "Ones that won't hold what I did against me. I love helping people too, and if that means I have to fight tyranny and corruption alongside outcasts and outlaws, then I'll do it."

Her reasoning was so innocent, and yet a part of Sam was still in awe and fearful of her. A kind heart that was ready to commit whatever atrocities might be necessary. It was quite contradictory.

"You're very brave," he finally said, reaching out to squeeze her arm.

She grinned back at him. "Not brave," she replied, "just smart enough to know what to fight for."

There was a knock at the door that startled them both. Sam dropped his hand and followed Nikki's gaze as she peered around him. His heart momentarily jumped into his throat at the thought of an unwanted guest barging in, but he was soon reassured when his friend went to the window to have a look.

"It's alright," she called back to him. "It's just Puffy." She opened the door a moment later, and the captain quickly trotted into the room.

Sam turned to face her. "Save me," he pleaded jokingly as Nikki came towards him again, needle aloft.

He needed Puffy to save him from a lot of things, and his tailored humiliation was only one of them.

Puffy couldn't help but scoff when faced with her friend's puppy dog eyes. "Oh no, poor Sam's being smothered by silks," she teased, earning her a grumble and an eye roll.

"Help me, please," he said again.

"Stop whining, and maybe I will."

"There's no need," Nikki interrupted, moving away from Sam. "Everything's done. Now you can go and get dressed properly, you big baby."

Puffy watched as Sam mumbled a thank you and made a bee-line for a pile of scarlet red and inky black velvet on the nearest chair. He gathered everything up in his arms and went to open a nearby door, before turning back to the two girls present.

"Is it alright if I change in there?" he asked, and Puffy suddenly realized what that meant for her. Alone with Nikki.

"You can do it here, I don't mind," she jumped in as fast as she possibly could. Too fast, perhaps, as she received a hefty amount of questioning glances.

Sam was the first to speak. "I'm flattered that you want to watch me," he said with an unbelievably straight face, "but I have to remind you that you have to get changed too, and I respect your privacy." He gave her a small, respectful bow.

Fuck, Sam! Stop acting like a gentleman for once and help me out here!

Unfortunately, Sam didn't read minds yet, or give any indication that he did, so her less-than flustered plea remained unspoken. She was reduced to simply forcing out a thankful smile and nodding.

"Unless there's a reason you *want* me to stay?"

Puffy caught his gaze, and stopped. There was something there, hidden behind his usual softness; a glint of knowing, of understanding. She had never talked to him about this particular situation before, and yet he still seemed to have figured it out. In that moment, she realized that she couldn't run and hide from it forever, not anymore, and

he was giving her a choice. Either she could go in alone, or with him present, as moral support.

For once, the second option was the one that sounded the most unappealing. She could do this alone. She *had* to do this alone, tonight, and not bring him into a mess she wished that he wouldn't have to be a part of.

She shook her head and smiled, letting him know. "No reason. I just spoke too quickly."

That was half-true, at least, and she could take some sort of comfort in that.

Sam's eyes lingered once more on her, at least until she gave him a nod. "In that case, I'll leave you be." He bowed once again. "Ladies."

After that, the door was closed, and Puffy was left to the wolves. The wolf. The she-wolf, to be exact.

Nikki spoke first. "Your dress is on the chair," she said warmly. "I did my best, although it might need a few adjustments."

Puffy looked up, just quickly enough to be polite, but not to see. "Thank you," she replied, her voice strained and no higher than a whisper.

She retrieved the pile of soft red material, and walked to a corner of the room. She looked calm and collected – or so she liked to imagine. The reality could have very well been much more frantic from Nikki's point of view. As she undressed, she expected to feel a burning stare on her back, guilt-tripping and cold, but it seemed that Nikki was acting politely as well. Puffy hurried up and pulled the dress over her head.

The gown was beautiful beyond words. The top started with a low neck and ended at a cinched waist that needed to be laced up from behind like a corset. The rest below was made of rich, wine red silk that flowed all the way down to the floor in a bright, glossy waterfall. A few layers bunched at the back – almost like a bow – and when the captain glimpsed herself in a nearby mirror, she took a moment to simply stare. Soft red rose petals were tangled in her brown and white hair – remains of an unfortunate encounter with a rosebush that provided her a hiding place from curious eyes on her way here. She made a move to pick them out, then thought better of it and turned around. The material rustled against her legs like dried autumn leaves, pleasant to the ear and soft to the skin.

She didn't know why she had gone with her chosen outfit. When she was asked what she wanted, it had slipped out naturally. A dress. It was unusual, but then again, why not? She was so used to uniforms and battle-wear, maybe feeling a little more free for once could be a good thing. So far, she liked it, and smiled.

"I knew it would look amazing on you!" Nikki's cheerful voice interrupted her.

Puffy briefly tilted her head towards her, gulping. Her face fell. "Uhh, yeah. It's great." She smoothed the skirt down, suddenly embarrassed. She had to admit that Nikki really outdid herself on this one.

The talented seamstress in question beckoned her forwards. "Just a few things need to be fixed," she said.

At the prospect of being in such close proximity, the captain laughed nervously, and shrugged up the thin shoulder strap that had started to slip. "It's a perfect fit," she tried to assure her. "You really don't need to go to any trouble—"

But from the way Nikki hadn't budged, she knew she was failing miserably. She sighed and built up her courage, walking towards her. Her hooves tapped the floor in perfect sync with her heart, or so she tried to imagine. In truth, her pace was calm and moderated; her heartbeat, decidedly less so.

"Out of the two I have to help out, I get stuck with the two cowards," Nikki giggled when the captain eventually joined her. "You and Sam make a pretty, complaining pair, I can tell you that much."

Puffy didn't answer, and simply moved her hair out of the way when Nikki went to tighten the back of her dress. She glanced wistfully towards the door Sam had disappeared through, regretting her decision to send him away. Was he listening through the wood? Was he ignoring it all? Did he find the situation amusing, or did his respect for the captain waver at her cowardice to the whole thing? The room stayed shut, and she had to accept that she would never know.

A jolt ripped her back to reality as the oxygen was all but torn out of her lungs. She tried to grab whatever she could, which ended up being the back of a chair. She felt like her insides were about to explode, and she gasped.

"Whoops! Sorry about that!"

The pressure immediately dropped, and Puffy's grip loosened. She breathed out in relief, still feeling a little air-tight and aware of her whole face burning up.

Nikki emerged from behind her, an apologetic smile plastered on her face. "I'm assuming you can breathe now?" The captain nodded, and the girl continued, pinching a part of the dress and lifting it up. "I'll just quickly tighten this side, then you should be good to go!"

She got out her needle and thread, and crouched down beside the spot. She would have, if Puffy didn't suddenly stop her. Before she could control herself, she grabbed Nikki's arm and hauled her up.

"Nikki—" Her mouth went dry. What the heck was she doing? What had possessed her?

Nikki stood in front of her, eyebrows slightly cocked in confusion. "Puffy? Are you alright?"

Was she alright?

Was she *alright*?

"No, no I'm not. Not when I'm around you!" It came out ruder than she intended it to be, and she backed down immediately. "I mean, not when we're... we were... Just forget about it..."

She turned away, her face burning up from shame, embarrassment and all-around panic. Her heart was beating madly, so close to exploding in a terrible, terrible way. Her dress suddenly felt unbearably tight around her chest, and she needed it undone. Now.

Her hands began to blindly fumble with the strings, tugging at them and trying desperately to undo them. She only pulled it tighter. The narrower it got, the more she panicked and the more she tugged. Drowning, that's what it felt like. Fighting only to keep sinking, pulled down to the depths and rest in a cold, watery grave. She had drowned once before, and she felt like she was about to again.

A pair of gentle fingers pushed her away, and slowly undid the laces for her. Finally, her chest relaxed, and she gulped down a fresh mouthful of air.

"Breathe. Just breathe."

Nikki's voice was soothing. Too soothing. Why was it so calm and gentle? Puffy spun around to face her.

"You shouldn't be alright around me either!" she exclaimed.

Nikki looked even more puzzled. "Why not? I like you."

I like you.

No, no, she didn't. She was just saying that. It was a lie.

"Please stop pretending and just say that you hate me," the captain said, her head down.

"Why would I hate you?"

"You know why."

A silence fell over them both. Puffy began to trace the hem of her dress and inspect the floor, anything to not look up. Puffy knew why, Nikki knew why. They both knew why.

A chance meeting during L'Manberg's reconstruction, hours worth of conversations, some afternoon picnics, evening strolls, and a couple of kisses. Those were the simple few ingredients that when lovingly mixed together and baked at the right temperature made the rose-tinted relationship they both had, once upon a time. Puffy had never thought that she would ever have something like she used to have with Schlatt, but Nikki had proved her wrong. She was as enchanting as a mermaid, as gentle as a forest spirit and as sweet as pie, Puffy's heart only became fuller and fuller, and she had been beyond happy.

Then the Egg happened. Then L'Manberg fell. Then Dream was imprisoned. Then Tommy started to need her around...

Things began to crumble, and Puffy latched on to those who were still there for her. Tommy, Tubbo, Ranboo and Sam.

Above all, she had tried to hold on to Nikki, so tightly that when the bond frayed and snapped, she plummeted and hit the ground. Hard. They were living in two separate worlds.

The only thing that was still there, a fragment of a romance not entirely past, was a ring Nikki had given her. Puffy had kept it safe, hoping that there was a way to patch things up at some point. And yet, with no sign of any reconciliation or reconnection between them both – not even a glance or a word in passing – the jewel was stashed safely away in a small chest in the corner of her home. Buried beneath more riches, it was all but forgotten, and the captain tried to move on.

She soon realized she couldn't, not completely, until they both were caged in the conversation they were having right now.

"Oh," Nikki finally breathed. "Puffy..."

"Don't," she said hoarsely, feeling touches creep up her arms.

She tried to move away, as if to keep herself away from the other, terrified by what could happen. The touches soon turned into strokes, and then into a hug. Nikki was hugging her. Puffy stayed frozen to the spot. She wanted to be cold and lash out, aghast at what Nikki was doing, but she couldn't. She was physically and mentally unable to, calmed by the gentle aura of roses and sugary treats.

"Puffy, none of it was your fault," Nikki said, her head buried into the captain's shoulder. "If anything, *I'm* the one to blame for everything."

Betraying L'Manberg. That was it, that was the only thing Nikki could potentially be sorry about. What about them slowly drifting apart? What about fearing the other's very presence, deliberately avoiding eye contact and escaping when she had the chance? What about essentially breaking them apart without a single word being spoken? Who was to blame for all that, really?

Nikki continued. "But if you're insisting on feeling guilty, just know you will always be forgiven. You don't have to ask for it or prove yourself: I always will. You'll always be worthy of my forgiveness."

A hand cupped her cheek, in a gesture that Puffy normally found comforting. Right now, however, it burned a hole right through her. It hurt for a bit, but it wasn't as painful as she imagined it was. Eventually, she caved in.

"Do you regret anything?" the captain asked.

"With you? How could I ever!" Nikki smiled, and began to stroke her face. "Just because it didn't last doesn't mean it wasn't meant to stay for a while. I still love you, Puffy. Maybe it's in a different way than before, but I still love you. You'll always be my favourite captain."

She gave her a little salute, and Puffy felt herself tear up.

Nikki went on. "I love you differently, but never any less. I shouldn't be the one stopping you from going out and finding someone else."

She seemed to understand what they both needed, and yet there was still a small part of Puffy that wanted them both to go back to what they used to and could have been. A small attachment, whether she liked it or not, still lingered.

"It's dangerous to fall in love on these shores," she replied.

"You say that as if you've got someone in mind already."

"I think our relationship has shown the consequences far too well, hasn't it?"

"Still," Nikki shrugged, "danger can make things fun. I thought you of all people would like that."

"It's different."

In what way, she didn't know. Everything was different now, for the right and wrong reasons. Puffy pulled away slightly from the hug. Nikki was smiling at her, so she did as well. Her face and her eyes were just as beautiful as the day the captain had first met her, and yet they didn't have the same, unbearably magical effect on her now. Maybe it was a sign or moving on, or something else entirely.

A conversation she had so long ago with Sam came back to her.

"Maybe not being able to love isn't so bad after all," she said, unsure why she blurted that out loud.

"A life with love can be tragic, but so is a life without it. You just need to decide which is worth fighting for," Nikki said. "I certainly have, and I can say with pride that it was an honour getting to live a romance with you."

The kiss that landed on Puffy's cheek soon after was friendly above everything else. A goodbye, but not a tragic one. Simply the only story in the captain's life that had finished well.

Puffy gave Nikki a curtsy and a grin. "Likewise."

And with that, a nerve-wracking problem was finally fixed, and that hole was filled. A proper break-up, that's what was truly needed to put her mind and heart at ease. A break-up with communication, reassurance, and honesty.

"Now," Nikki said, interrupting her train of thought, "how about I lace the back up again and get to work on that hem?"

Puffy turned around to give her better access. "Yes, please do!"

A moment later, they were deep in conversation, as if their friendship hadn't only just been repaired. Nikki talked about picking up her hobbies again, teasingly complained about a new friendship she has struck up with Jack Manifold, and invited Puffy to bake with her again one day. Once the dress was fixed and they did their make-up side by side in front of a mirror, Puffy told Nikki about her life in Snowchester, the "anti-Egg" vigilante side of her that she let loose at night, her reconciliation with Tubbo, and her little Michelle.

"I mean, I understand that parenting can be scary, especially after what happened to Tommy in the prison," Puffy said, touching up her lipstick, "but I sometimes wish he'd be a bit more present, y'know?"

Nikki hummed, snapping her blush shut. "You can't go wrong with asking for child support money," she said, making them both burst out laughing.

"Poor Sam," the captain sighed. "He really is a good guy, and he *is* trying his best. I'm proud of him."

"Sounds like more than pride if you ask me," Nikki said, playfully knocking her hip. A door creaked open somewhere near them.

"You see, Puffy? I was right. Just talking it out with Nikki wasn't going to make her rip your throat out."

The captain faced the voice as soon as it caught her attention, and she stared, rooted to the spot. She almost dropped the lipstick he was still holding. She didn't know why, it was a usual sight. Sam, leaning against the doorway, one foot brought up behind him and his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Then why did he seem so different in that moment? So regal, unnaturally so, even. A high collared, black waistcoat decorated with curly golden stitching contrasted sharply with the white shirt underneath and the scarf. Over it all, draped over his shoulders and running down to his waist, was a black cape with a scarlet underside and golden tassels on his shoulders, held together by a couple of shining, finely crafted chains.

Nikki had gone all out for the both of them, it seemed. With the glimmering highlights, as well as the dark velvet that draped his build like the finely shaded figures in cracked oil paintings, Sam looked like a prince.

No, not a prince. A king.

She was staring into the green and black eyes of *a king*.

"Enjoying the view?" Sam smirked, pushing himself away from the wall.

"Your Majesty," she said quietly, without drawing her eyes away. Faced with his flustered expression, the corner of her mouth curved up into a smirk and she bowed.

"Puffy, please." Gods, he did look genuinely uncomfortable. "I'm no king."

"You look like one."

"Don't say that in front of Techno, he'll have my head."

Puffy couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Not a word," she agreed, knowing for a fact that it wouldn't matter. The piglin wouldn't hurt Sam, no matter what.

Nikki brushed past them, arms full of silver satin, and disappeared through the door Sam had just come out of. "If there's a problem of any kind," she said to them both, "just shout."

The door closed, and they were left alone, in silence. Puffy sighed, more serene than she had been in ages, and sat down on the nearest chair. A moment of relaxation and calm was much appreciated, especially after her talk with Nikki. It was a little awkward and there were multiple times where she had wanted to run out and call the whole thing off. Yet, she pulled it off, and one more weight was lifted off her shoulders. She closed her eyes for a few well-deserved moments of rest, right before being awoken by footsteps.

Sam was pacing aimlessly around the room, occasionally tugging at his richly adorned attire and anxiously fiddling with his hands. He was acting a little like Ranboo, if she was being completely honest, and just watching him made her jumpy too.

She called out to him, "You're going to exhaust yourself if you keep that up. We've got a long night ahead of us."

"Right, sorry."

He sat down on a nearby chest, and dragged a hand through the green hair that fell in front of his face. Puffy had to admit that he looked good with it now longer, although right now it seemed to be more of a hindrance to him than anything. The captain

reached for a nearby spool of red ribbon and cut a decent strand. She then walked up to him and held it up in front of his eyes.

"Need some help?"

Sam hesitated for a moment, then seemed to understand. "Uhh, yeah," he coughed. He shuffled across, giving her room to sit down beside him. "Thank you."

He reached out to take the ribbon, but Puffy held it just out of reach and waited until he got the message. He slightly tilted his head until she could reach the back, and she got to work.

"I didn't have time to cut it," Sam said quietly after a while.

Puffy gave him a little, playful nudge, just as she finished the bow. Now, most of his hair was back, tied into a small ponytail and leaving only a couple stray locks at the front.

"Don't be sorry, Sam! You look nice the way you are," she assured him.

"I'm not asking you if I'm still dashing or not," he chuckled in a light-hearted tone that made Puffy sigh in relief. "It's all very well keeping it long, but it gets in the way sometimes. It's a matter of utility."

"Still," the captain said as he turned to look at her. She smiled at him and gave him another friendly nudge.

He cracked a smile at her compliment and grasped her hand. A moment later, Puffy leaned into him, her head resting in the crook of his shoulder. She was just so unbelievably lucky she could do so. The material of his cape was soft and warm, just like him. He was back, and she had never been happier. She closed her eyes, content, just as a gentle hand began to stroke her back.

"I didn't get the chance to say it earlier," Sam suddenly said, "but you look nice."

Puffy couldn't hide the beaming smile that spread across her face, her whole body warming up at the compliment. She pushed away from her spot on her friend's shoulder, just enough to see his face.

"So do you," she said, throwing the ball back to him and running the material of his shirt through her fingers. "Although that seems to be a bit of a problem, at least from the way you're acting."

At first, she thought that she had said the wrong thing from the way Sam turned rigid, but she soon persuaded herself that she was right to do so when he started speaking again. Once again, his hand landed on her back, stroking it in small circles with his thumb. If that reassured him and kept him calm, the captain was going to let him continue, especially as it felt... nice.

"We agreed that we'd be honest with each other, right?"

"That was the plan, yes."

Gods, what was he about to admit to? Murder? A terminal illness? Something else entirely, but just as equally devastating? She waited to hear.

Sam sighed, looking away. "I don't like getting dressed up like this because it reminds me of when I was a kid," he said in a mumble.

Puffy was startled by the answer she wasn't expecting.

"Sounds silly, I know," Sam laughed dryly, getting up and beginning to pace again. "My family was far better-off than many, in both status and money. Unfortunately, I was born into that and it was hell."

The green and black eyes of a king.

Could it be true?

"Are you royalty?"

Puffy was suddenly much more aware of her posture, her tone and every little gesture towards her friend that could have maybe been considered improper.

Sam glanced back at her. "No, gods no! Thankfully not! They just owned a few lands and a couple of castles, but that was enough to bring us into contact with those kinds of higher ranks."

"It sounds like a dream," the captain said, well aware that it could never be.

"A nightmare, more like. The rules got stricter the older me and my siblings got, the days were repetitive and boring, but I could have managed. I could have managed and lived with it if I wasn't constantly expected to, well... You've heard of arranged marriages, right?"

Her stomach churned and her heart sank. She perked up, her ears twitching. She wanted to run up and give him a hug, though she felt like it wasn't the right time.

"The balls I was dragged along to only had one goal. In fact, my entire upbringing did, and that was to get me to claim the highest rank I could. It's all about power in the end. That's all anyone cares about. I didn't have a word in anything, and when my parents finally chose someone for me... I ran. On the night of the betrothal announcements, I ran away and never returned."

Running away from home to escape something, that was an all too familiar story to Puffy. It was one she didn't expect to share with one of her closest friends.

Sam was no longer looking at her. "He was a prince I met once," he said, more to himself than anything. "Once. Maybe I could have grown to love him, but the shackles of my obligation would have always been there, haunting me."

"So that's it?" Puffy said. "You just left everything behind?"

"You make me sound like a monster. I *did* write to my mother for a while. She was the only one who really understood me and my actions. To an extent that her morals allowed her to, at least. I found out from her that my father said I had disgraced our name and that I was crossed out of the inheritance. I couldn't return even if I had wanted to."

With that new knowledge, she took a closer look at his hands as he slipped on a pair of gloves. They were scarred, calloused, and stained with the tarnished remains of redstone dust. They were not the hands of a noble, and maybe that was the point. Escaping his rank was a challenge, and his roughed up hands were perhaps one of the ways he tried to do that.

"I didn't care then, and I don't care now." He shrugged, and Puffy couldn't help but admire his ability to stay indifferent to the whole situation. "I know what it's like to have a childhood ripped away from you, and I vowed to not let it happen to anyone else."

It didn't take a genius to know that he was referring to Tommy, and Puffy could feel the pain in his tone. She walked over to him and gently touched his shoulder, trying to find a way to lighten the mood.

"You gave up on everything anyone could have ever dreamed of, just to end up here?" she said softly.

"Yeah, basically."

"Sam, you're an idiot." She laughed loudly when he stared at her with a shocked, incredulous look. She shook him gently in mock frustration. "We could have split your family fortune! Think a little next time!"

It took a moment for the ice to crack, before Sam chuckled along with her. "I think I smell a gold-digger."

"Treasure is my weakness, Your Majesty," she teased with a wink.

"Only my treasure? Not me? I am appalled."

"Your title would do nicely as well."

"Rolling up to reclaim my long lost inheritance with a sea captain on my arm would be one way to give my father a heart attack, that's for sure."

"Well, if it speeds up the process..."

"You, darling, are downright evil!" He playfully tapped the end of her nose with his index, making her laugh. "Evil, but cunning."

"We'd make a great team," she agreed. "Imagine what ruling together would be like."

"I knew it, you just want a pretty crown on your head, don't you?"

"And your money too," Puffy pointed out with a sly grin. "But if you were running away from your old life, I'm afraid you've failed."

"How so?"

"You're a leader of the Badlands, the owner of the largest prison ever created, and don't think I haven't seen your treasure trove in the mountains—"

"But I'm free to love who I want and live my own life," Sam said, cutting her off, "and that's the most important part."

Puffy fell quiet. She still remembered vividly how Sam had said he wished he couldn't love, so leaving an entire life to finally be able to... He was a lot more complicated than she thought, and maybe it was because she *shouldn't* understand. Maybe it was for the

better, in the end. Her friend didn't need to be understood, he just needed to be loved and listened to. He forged a whole new life for those few simple goals, after all.

She still had one more question that wouldn't leave her alone.

"Was it worth it?"

"Yes," he said, "yes it was."

He was looking at her, really looking, as if his words were meant only for her. Her mouth was dry, as were her lips. Her hand on his shoulder didn't move. She didn't say anything. Neither did he. She could do nothing but stay locked in place by his gaze. His green irises drowned in two pools of void black were hypnotizing. She couldn't drag her attention away, too engrossed in their almost otherworldly enchantment.

"What are you staring at?" he asked her.

"I don't know," she pushed out with some difficulty. "Just you, I guess..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Like what you see?"

She couldn't answer. Her mind went blank. "I—"

The door to Nikki's home was suddenly thrown across the room. Before anyone even had the chance to scream, four figures burst indoors. Immediately, Puffy pushed herself away from Sam and composed herself.

"Sorry we're late!" Techno's voice boomed like thunder as the piglin rushed in, carrying a heavy chest in his arms.

He dropped it down on the floor and flung it open. The smell of must filled the air like a disease, making Puffy wrinkle her nose in disgust.

"No problem," she coughed, trying to peer around the chest lid to see whose rotting corpse was trying to intoxicate them all.

Two of the four new arrivals blocked her view before she could, pulling out armfuls of dark material that only made the odour stronger.

Puffy heard Sam splutter, then lean towards her. "Should we tell them that someone probably died in those?"

The captain sighed. "Do you think that will stop them?"

The answer was a resounding "no". The only two who hadn't moved to grab anything were Ranboo – who had sheepishly picked up the unhinged door and snuck looks around, likely searching for a place to hide it – and Philza, who instead headed towards an elegant red suit fitted onto a nearby mannequin. The avian picked up one of the sleeves between his fingers and Puffy saw him crack a smile.

He turned around and greeted both her and Sam, then peered around the rest of the room. "Nikki?" he called.

The door to the bedroom flew open and the seamstress rushed out, pulling down the beautiful silver gown she wore as she went. She headed straight to the front door, hurriedly pinning up her hair.

"Yes, yes! That one's for you, Phil," she called out.

Phil smiled, "Perfect." He undressed the stand before disappearing into the next room as well, wings only just hindering him as he bent under the doorframe.

"Ranboo, come on, we haven't got all night!"

Visibly startled by Techno's cry, the hybrid shoved the door into Nikki's waiting arms and went over to rummage through the chest himself.

Puffy was dazzled by the scene, and not just because of the shining jewels and clothes being flung around the room. "This is—"

"—chaos," Sam finished for her, chuckling and patting her shoulder. "Welcome to my life for the past few months."

"Techno, are you the one who broke down my door?" Nikki asked.

"I might have."

She sighed, still holding it. "Now I'll have to call someone to fix it," she tutted.

Puffy felt Sam's hand leave her shoulder as he headed over to Nikki. "I'm here," he said, lifting the piece of wood out of her grasp. "I'll do it."

"Thank you, Sam. It's nice to see a gentleman with good manners around here."

Sapnap glared up at her, one foot in his trouser leg. "Are you talking about me?"

"Not everything is about you," she groaned, slapping him as she walked past.

"Rude," he muttered, continuing with his task at hand.

Puffy watched as Nikki rolled her eyes and surveyed the scene with a critical eye, crossing her arms. Her face twisted into a grimace.

"I thought you said you already had a tailor and didn't need me to do anything."

"I didn't," came a far away voice. "I was smart and put in a word with you, Nikki!"

"Yes, thank you Phil, and I'm glad you did. At least *you* are not going to stink the entire place out."

"Harsh," Technoblade grunted, taking off his shirt. Faced with so much muscular piglin bulk and fur, Puffy didn't know where to look except down.

The tapping of a foot reached her ears, followed by an exasperated sigh. "Is your tailor a hundred years old," Nikki said, "or is his trademark giving his creations the smell of their owners' tombs?"

Puffy couldn't help but scoff at that. At least she wasn't the only one complaining about the smell.

"The tailor fell through when he realized who we were," Techno said.

"Fell through? In what way?"

There was silence.

"Techno, *what did he fall through?*"

The piglin coughed, and masterfully brushed over that questionable detail. "We couldn't get the clothes from him in the end. We just had to salvage what we could."

"What, from an antique merchant?"

"Laugh it up, but that's exactly what we did. They had our sizes, which was a real surprise. You could almost say it was meant to be."

"Fuck, there's blood on this."

Puffy raised her gaze. Sapnap was standing up straight, dressed in a loose, white shirt that exposed part of his chest. Glowing orange trails throbbed under his skin, but that wasn't what everyone was looking at. Sapnap was holding out the front of the shirt where a large, dark brown stain had soaked the material. Thankfully, it didn't look fresh, although Puffy had no idea whether that was a good thing or not. The room fell silent.

"Maybe it's wine?" Sam suggested from the doorway, sounding incredibly unsure.

"Yeah, wine," Sapnap mumbled in agreement, although the captain knew that no one thought it was.

"I could try and cover it for you," Nikki piped up.

The fireborn hesitated. "Don't bother," he replied, "I can just say it was a burn or something..."

He dropped it and fastened a belt around his hips. The disturbed glint in his eyes hadn't wavered, however, and Puffy noticed. She couldn't blame him.

"Well, don't worry about it," Techno said, handing Sapnap a handful of golden chains. "Everyone will likely be too polite to point it out anyway."

"Um, Puffy? Could I ask you something?"

As Nikki's house devolved back into chaotic preparation, Puffy felt a soft finger tap her shoulder. Looking around, she was met with the chest of a familiar, lanky figure. She had to crane her neck upwards to see him completely, and smiled.

"Of course, what is it?"

"Well I, uh, I haven't actually worn one of these for a while and I... sort of forgot how to tie it." Ranboo's long fingers fiddled with a red tie that he shakily held out to her. He laughed nervously. "Could you perhaps—"

With no hesitation, Puffy beckoned him down and set about tying his tie. She was flattered that Ranboo had come to her for help, and her insides swelled with a familiar, motherly pride. The hybrid was on his perfect behaviour, staying completely still to the point of even holding his breath.

"There!" She straightened it for him and stepped back, not before taking the opportunity to ruffle his hair affectionately. "There's the handsome enderman we all know!"

Ranboo looked surprised, before giving her a shaky smile and diverting his gaze. He mumbled something along the lines of a "thanks" and "you look nice too", embarrassed. She gave him a proper once-over, hoping that the old, decaying relics Techno had salvaged for him were at least presentable.

She was pleasantly surprised to find that they were in fact more than decent, and quite elegant: a white shirt, a black waistcoat and a red tie. It didn't differ too much from what Puffy would occasionally see him wear on the daily, except that the materials' fine prints were much more exquisite. She tucked his tie into his waistcoat, for which he seemed thankful. As he stood up straight, Puffy couldn't help but agree with Techno. They could laugh all they wanted at the smell or age of their attire, but they were extremely lucky to have found some that fit them perfectly. After all, Ranboo was far from average height, and yet his clothes seemed made for him. He stood tall, his long tail whipping happily out behind him. His outfit was perhaps the simplest out of everyone's, but he seemed to like it.

Puffy's face only fell when she caught a glimpse of cuffs. Stained with the same, dark liquid as the front of Sapnap's shirt, her stomach somersaulted, and she hurried to turn them back before he could notice.

"Just some wine stains," she said to him.

"Wine?" He gulped. "Do you mean—"

"I don't know," she admitted. Then, she grinned again. "Perhaps what you're wearing belonged to a butler."

She didn't know whether she was trying to reassure him or herself, but looking closer, it could have been more than plausible. A butler. Yes, that was it, a butler who once worked in a lavish household, and the stains were probably wine. After all, why would a butler's hands be stained by blood?

Ranboo perked up. "I *am* good at carrying things," he purred, making the captain laugh.

"Well in that case, maybe you start handing out the masks," Techno interrupted, making them both jump. Puffy had no idea that he had been listening to them all this time.

Ranboo gave him a little bow. "Yes, sir!" he exclaimed, striding back towards the chest and rummaging through it.

Philza emerged from where he had been changing, elegantly adjusting his black tie and pruning his feathers. The braces Sam made were still strapped to his back, although Puffy noticed that they had since been decorated with black lace and golden chains, blending them in with the rest of his suit. Before she could compliment him herself, Sam made his way towards him with something long in his hands.

"I made this for you," he said, holding out an item the captain soon recognized as a walking stick. The top was decorated with a golden crow's head, finely moulded.

"Way to rub in my age," Philza scoffed.

Sam suddenly yanked the handle, and a silver foil slid out of the cane with a satisfying hiss. "It's not just to help your aching bones."

The avian looked stunned and took the cane once Sam had slid the sword back into it. "Thank you," he said, then smirked. "But you're still reminding me of my age."

"Aha!" Ranboo cried.

A moment or two later, he stood up from the chest, a collection of shining, colorful objects swinging from ribbons hooked around his arms. He looked very proud of himself.

"Techno let me choose the ones that don't smell," he said to them all, handing the glittering objects out to their respective owners.

Everyone began to put theirs on, and it was soon obvious which ones were also from the antique merchant and belonged to the clothes their owners wore. Not only was it because they matched, but they were the ones worn by the people who tried to stifle coughs and visibly winced against the odor. The older masks happened to belong to everyone except for Puffy, Sam and Philza.

Even Nikki had been targeted, with a beautiful silver mask in the shape of a butterfly. "It's beautiful, but it reeks," she gasped. Puffy could clearly see her eyes watering from behind the eyeholes.

"Be thankful we remembered that you already had a gown," Technoblade said. "The guy was selling one that suited that mask perfectly."

The piglin seemed to be bearing the smell better than everyone else, even if what he was wearing gave off the majority of it. He was, quite literally, strapped into a magnificent black overcoat, complete with golden lapels, tassels and buttons. It fit him just barely, but he still seemed able to move around more than freely. Puffy wondered if the previous owner was a large, hulking piglin too. He put on his own mask: half golden and half black. He was the spitting image of a high-ranking aristocrat. Ironical for an anarchist.

Sapnap's mask covered half of his face like a crescent moon, and Ranboo's was black and white, encrusted with green and red jewels. It matched his skin and his eyes shockingly well. Philza's mask was made up of shining black feathers and had a pointed beak stretching over the tip of his nose, just like a crow's.

Puffy looked over at Sam as he adjusted his own; one that at first glance resembled the upper half of a skull and concealed a good portion of his face. Pearly white, it was engraved with small, barely noticeable vines and leaves that curled around the eye holes. For a moment, the captain was taken aback. Her friend was borderline unrecognizable – and that had undoubtedly been the point of the mask's purchase.

"Do you need help with yours?" he suddenly asked her.

Puffy snapped back to the mask in her hands, unaware that she had been staring at him for so long. Silver vines and blue semi-precious stones that matched her eyes wove the mask that lay in her hands. She didn't need help, really, but since he was offering...

"Sure," she shrugged, handing him the mask and turning around. "Why not?"

Sam was gentle with his hands, and even when he tightened the bow at the back, she knew he was making sure not to hurt her. The consideration had always been there since they first became friends, but after almost losing him—

When he finished, she turned to face him and gently touched his wrist, now covered by a dark black glove. "Thank you," she whispered, giving it a squeeze.

Before she could react, her friend bowed down graciously and kissed the back of her hand. "You're welcome, Your Highness," he replied with a purr, before his smirk told her that he was poking fun at her.

Puffy pulled her hand from him and gave him a shove. "Unbelievable," she groaned, rolling her eyes and hoping that her mask hid the light flush that had graced her cheeks.

"Alright, seems like we can finally get on to the briefing."

Technoblade's voice boomed throughout the room, thankfully breaking up any further conversation or light-hearted teasing. Everyone turned to listen, watching as the piglin reached into the chest and withdrew a small pouch. He tossed it up into the air like a ball, catching it in his palm and presenting it to the rest of them.

"Tonight is the night that we take action against the Egg," he announced. "These pouches are filled with soul sand. Take as many as you can carry."

In one swift movement with everyone else, Puffy bent down beside the chest, finding that the spaces hadn't been previously taken up by musty old outfits and masks were filled by similar-looking bundles to the one Techno was holding. She grabbed one and rolled it in her hand. Hushed voices wormed their way into her ears, filling her head with anguished, fiery screams.

Soul sand. Who knew that such a small thing could damage such a powerful entity?

Who knew? They knew, that's who. After the initial moment of inspection, it was like a frenzy had descended upon them all, and she along with her friends began to blindly grab at the chest's contents. The supply seemed endless: for every single one that was taken out, two more would tumble into its place, like the heads of the mythical Hydra. Puffy wouldn't have put it past Techno to have somehow harnessed the powers of the monster, or any creature like it inside the woodworks and wrought iron of the chest. In any case, it was extremely useful to their plan, and she was all for it.

The abundant bags of soul sand were stuffed inside pockets, wedged into boots, slipped into sleeves and essentially hidden wherever they could be. At one point, Nikki got up from the group to get her sewing supplies, managing to hang garlands of bags on the underside of her skirts. She soon persuaded Puffy to do the same with her own dress and Sam with his cape.

Before long, all the pouches had been taken and concealed. They left only a couple of stray grains of sand inside the chest, as well as the shared stench of the Nether and old clothes. Technoblade banged the lid shut as soon as the last bundle was taken.

The assembled stood to attention once again, sharing determined glances. If she didn't know where to look, Puffy would have never even known that they were all walking firebombs underneath their evening-wear. Her dress felt like it was made of rocks when she stood, pulled down by the added weight of the sand. The bags weighed heavily

around her hips and knocked her legs as she walked, but other than that she could move just as freely.

The original pouch Techno had been holding was still out in the open for all to see. He quickly tucked it into his sleeve, then cleared his throat again.

"We have no idea what's awaiting us at the banquet," the piglin said, staring seriously at each of them in turn. "We don't know what the floorplan is, where everyone will be or who is infected. Discretion is key for this to work. You can't draw attention to yourself, especially you two."

Puffy followed Techno's stare as it landed on Sapnap and Sam. The two men shared a look, and nodded. One had burned down a kingdom that was quite possibly going to be present that same night, and the other was supposed to be dead. If they were found out, the entire mission could fail, with catastrophic consequences for all of them.

Technoblade continued, addressing all of them once again. "Spread the sand. Don't linger in the same area too long, we only have limited resources."

Puffy took a step forward. "The soul sand is only kindling," she reminded them all. "It's only there to fuel the blue fire and once the flames touch the tendrils, it's checkmate. A single grain is enough to get it going."

She looked up at Techno, and smiled when she saw him nod in agreement. "We just need to spread it," he said, taking the lead again, "spread it wherever you can. As for the ignition, I'll give Sapnap a signal."

"Then what?" Nikki asked. "Do we just run?"

"The whole place will be ablaze," Sam said. "It'll be chaos once people realize what's happening, and we can't leave them to die." He sounded ever so concerned and tense. Puffy placed her hand on the small of his back in an attempt to reassure him.

"Sam's right," Techno said, "we can't leave people to die. We're here to destroy the Egg, and we don't want any casualties caught in the crossfire..."

The piglin's voice trailed off, and he suddenly screwed his eyes shut. Puffy watched in silence as his snout and his ears twitched. His entire face seemed to twist, as if he was fighting a losing battle with himself.

"No blood," he finally growled out loud, but clearly more to himself than anything. "No blood will be spilt." He opened his eyes. "Is everything clear?"

Puffy expected everyone to nod in agreement, but there was apparently one more question that needed an answer, coming from Ranboo.

"And what if this banquet really is an apology," the hybrid asked, "what if it is really about turning over a new leaf?"

The simple inquiry sent ripples among them all. Determined gazes suddenly turned hostile, not towards Ranboo but towards a shared loathing that fuelled them all.

Technoblade raised his head up high, eyes blazing. "There are some creatures that can never be forgiven," he muttered.

There were Ranboo and Puffy's manipulations, Sam's imprisonment and later loss of life, Punz being forced to march his brother into the jaws of death, and so many more things the captain probably didn't even know of. The Egg had done all that and no matter how many luxurious evenings it offered or gifts it gave, it could never erase the past.

"We kill the Egg either way," Ranboo said, a good deal more confident than Puffy had ever seen him before.

"We kill the Egg either way," Technoblade echoed with a sharp nod. "Clear?"

Six voices agreed in determined unison.

The seventh was added soon after, "Then let us march on the Eggpire. The show must go on."

The march was really more of a stroll, as the group walked down the Prime Path, through the Greater SMP and eventually turned off, following a newly built road that veered off into the Badlands. The night was still young, and the moon was milky and full. Its soft beams paved their way and made their entire group glitter with starlight.

They stopped suddenly at one point, and Techno guided Ranboo away from the group. The rest stood on the road, waiting patiently.

Puffy, always worried about the hybrid, approached Philza. "Is he okay?"

The avian nodded, smiling. "It's just the enderwalk," he told her. "It should pass in a bit."

So they kept waiting, watching as Technoblade held Ranboo tightly in his arms. There was no way to know if it was to restrain him or to reassure him. A bit of both, quite likely.

Their journey picked up again soon after, and Ranboo looked completely fine, smiling and laughing. Their time was filled with small talk and playful jokes, but Puffy could tell that they were all trying to hide the inevitable dread and worry that they all shared. Even hidden behind decorated masks, their eyes were full of apprehension.

Would everything go to plan? Would the Egg be gone for good? Or would their mission only make the situation worse? Were they about to commit a heinous crime that could claim hundreds, if not thousands of lives?

Sam was the first to crack, just before they stepped into the moorlands. The rest of their group crossed over the border with no hesitation, but he lingered behind, stopping stock-still.

Puffy noticed, and waited for him. "Sam?"

Her friend was silent at first, and then... "It doesn't feel like my home anymore," he said quietly.

The captain watched as his eyes inevitably turned to the looming, abandoned mass of obsidian standing in the ocean. He stayed there for a while, tall but so unbelievably fragile. It was as if even the light breeze could knock him over.

"It's okay," she reassured him. She walked up to him and held his hand, drawing his gaze away from Pandora's Vault. "I'm here."

Sam still resisted, but only for a minute or two more. Then he took a deep breath, and stepped over the border.

The Badlands, Puffy had to admit, looked desolate without the tangled mess of red tendrils. Instead of a nation filled with dark, twisting growths and thorns the size of battle-axe blades, it was a wide open moor, speckled with patches of heather and the occasional, small village or crop field in the distance. It looked normal. Too normal. Now she had time to properly think about it, Puffy realized that the Egg's retreating vines bode nothing well, and this masquerade they were attending even less. She had a bad feeling about all of this. A stomach-sinking, throat-tightening, sickly feeling.

She leaned into the man walking by her side, still holding onto his arm. Trying to get her mind off things, she focused on him. There it was again, the consideration, as he made sure to walk much slower just so she could match his pace. The height difference between Sam and herself was apparent: one was tall, well-built and walked with long strides, and the other just reached his shoulder, keeping up as best she could with hooves tapping the wooden path like a rhythmic, beating heart. Sam was careful and gentle, especially with someone so much shorter than him, and Puffy couldn't thank him enough for it.

The path led them into the heart of the realm, and every step brought them closer to their target. It was a route that both of them knew well during their time in the Eggpire, of which the memories unfortunately stalled their willingness to walk. It took mutual reassurance and the egging on of their friends for them to finally have enough confidence to keep up.

The road kept winding, until it abruptly disappeared. In its place stretched a polished wooden staircase that sloped gently down into the earth. The entrance was framed by crimson growths and bunches of sharp, orange flowers that stared at them as they walked by. The night sky was soon hidden from view as earth and stone made up a low ceiling, guiding them towards the cavern. Once they reached the bottom, they were met with a beautiful, mahogany door watched over by two prim and proper footmen dressed in scarlet uniforms and black masks. One of them beckoned the newcomers closer, red eyes alight.

Of course they were red. Why would they be anything else?

Puffy and her allies continued their descent, subtly pushing Sam and Sapnap into the middle of their group to potentially hide them a bit better. The two men in question kept their heads down as best they could without looking suspicious.

The footmen held out his hand. "Weapons, please."

"What?" Technoblade roared, indignant. The captain saw his hand tighten around the hilt of the sword buckled to his waist.

"Weapons, please," the footman requested once again, ignoring the piglin's outburst. "This is a peaceful gathering, and any display of violence will not be tolerated."

Nikki shuffled her way up to Technoblade. "Let's listen to him," she whispered into his ear, just loud enough so Puffy and the group could hear her, "we don't want to cause a stir."

It took Technoblade a while to finally agree, and even longer to cooperate. As soon as his sword had left his hand, the rest of the group followed his lead. Sam handed over his own sword and Nikki a dagger. The only one who didn't cave in was Philza, who held the cane Sam had made him just out of reach when the footman went to grab it.

"Oh, so sorry young man, do you mind if I keep my cane?" the avian coughed, his voice suddenly frail and higher-pitched. "These old bones and wings aren't what they used to be, especially after all the wars and battles I've seen. You wouldn't deprive a man of his only crutch, now would you?" Phil ended his tirade with a shaky smile.

The footman gave him a once-over, then reluctantly agreed with a dismissive wave. He then stepped back into his position, and he and his companion pushed open the grand double doors. They revealed another tendril-covered passage beyond, ending with another pair of doors and guards.

So close to the Egg now, Puffy inhaled deeply and became the first to step down the new corridor now opened to them. Behind her, she picked out the relieved sighs of Sam and Sapnap, who were thankfully not recognized.

Techno spoke as they approached the next set of doors. "Well, what did that interaction just show us?"

"That Philza can live up to his age when he wants to?" Sapnap ventured, earning him a kick in the shin from Niki.

"They took our weapons. They want us to be weak. They're turning us into easy targets."

Something was definitely afoot, although that was news to no one. It just made the importance of what they were about to do so much more daunting and real. Only one more set of doors separated them and the dark, gloomy cavern. It had never even crossed Puffy's mind why the Eggpire was holding a huge event in such a small, overgrown and cramped space.

The second threshold was flung open, and the spectacle beyond dazzled them all. Puffy stopped, momentarily blinded. She stared at the cave she had once known.

Small, overgrown and cramped, or so it used to be. Not anymore.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Red Banquet

The Red Banquet.

It couldn't have been called any other name.

The cavern itself was far from how Puffy remembered it and from the shift in Sam's breath beside her, she knew she wasn't the only one stunned by the scene. It was dressed to the nines, red beyond belief and in all the shades it offered. Wine, burgundy, crimson, scarlet, and so many more draped the place from wall to wall in the form of fine drapes and silk banners.

Previously a cramped, gnarled jungle of thorned roots and slimy tendrils, wet and humid from the dripping stalactites hanging like chandeliers above, the cave had been completely and utterly transformed. Every wall was pushed out much further, the ceiling had been raised, and the floor was leveled out by large expanses of dark, shiny brown wooden planks that crisscrossed in a pattern reminiscent of the finest of palace floors. The sheer amount of work that had gone into transforming the cave was staggering, and showed everyone how big of a deal this event really was.

A small but well-crafted staircase led them down from the door. Still in awe, Puffy reached out to grab the railing, but immediately recoiled when a familiar, sticky slime coated her fingers. She looked down, and saw that the balustrade was made from twisted, pulsating red vines. The curled ends waved at her in a greeting. She followed the rest with her eyes, and she soon realized that they were snaking all around the room.

The spots on the walls that weren't covered by luscious silk curtains were layered by blankets of tangled thorns and bright orange flowers, some with glowing teeth able to cut through the toughest flesh. More roots of different sizes hung down from the ceiling, holding lanterns and glowstone lamps over the wooden paths bordering the sides. Some occasionally crossed over the planks, tripping up unsuspecting walkers and stretching out to the middle of the room.

The center was perhaps the most brightly lit area out of them all. Overlooked by a gargantuan, golden chandelier sparkling with hundreds of candles, the vast circle of wood set up the perfect ballroom floor. The edges were surrounded by a crown of imposing pillars made from the Egg's own vines, sitting at regular intervals from one another with their rooted ends gripping the floor below and ceiling above, spreading in tangled clumps like veins. A band – composed of a string quartet, a pianist and a flutist – in matching red suits sat on a raised platform facing the dance floor, playing a lively

melody that quickly charmed Puffy's senses. Behind them, in the distance – because what else could the back of the place be called when the room stretched out for ages? – , a familiar, hulking mass of crimson and blood-curdling whispers sat unmoving, looking out over the room before it.

What came as another shock however was the number of people that filled the cavern. Dresses and suits of scarlet, gold, black and white twirled upon the dark wood of the ballroom floor, or crossed each other on the outskirts. Puffy knew about balls from the few she had attended at King Eret's castle, and she knew that although everything seemed calm and collected, things would soon devolve after enough wine and dancing, if they hadn't already. Glittering masks concealed faces and hid identities, allowing debauchery, infidelity and even first-time romances to run wild. And yet, everything was done with the class, elegance and secrecy of a high-society ball. Waiters weaved in and out of the guests, carrying trays of light amuse-bouches and tall glasses of deep red drink looking suspiciously like blood. They stood tall and proper against the walls when they were not needed, turning a blind eye to the numerous scandals and affairs happening right under their very noses.

But the guests! There were so many! How were there so many? Surely they couldn't all have been there for the same reason Puffy and her own group were! How many still held sane minds and common sense?

"Well, we've got an idea of exactly what kind of terrain we have to cover," Puffy said, turning back to her friends. She lowered her tone as more masked and made up partygoers filed into the masquerade behind them. "Now what?"

Without missing a beat, Techno replied. "We split up into smaller groups," he said, then began pointing at everyone in turn. "Phil, Ranboo and Sapnap, you three head towards the back of the room and start there. Puffy and Nikki, you girls take the left side, Sam and I will take the right. Stick to the shadows, and try not to make what you're doing obvious. Our masks can offer us some cover, but the rest is on us and how we act. Is everything clear?"

The group nodded in unison. The piglin took out the small pouch he had hidden up his sleeve. With a flick of his sharp nail, he cut a hole in the sack material and soul sand began to pour out. Concealing it again, he made his way down the stairs, arm turned to the floor, and walked away with thin grains of sand glittering behind him. Sam gave the company a last, brief look and soon followed his wake. The rest of the group began to split up.

Puffy was handed a needle, and Nikki leaned down to pierce one of the bags under her red dress, pressing the sharp point through the fabric. As some of the sand began to trickle down the sheep's leg, Nikki did the same to her own dress, then pulled her friend along. "Let's go."

Bad was never the most ecstatic of partygoers, or one for large, glitzy events in general. Perhaps it was because he normally preferred to spend a quiet evening curled up by the fire with a book, or maybe it was because he had always felt severely out of place in the rare few balls he did attend. And yet, for a first attempt at organizing such a pompous display of glamour and fantasy, he figured that it wasn't too shabby. Not too shabby at all, in fact.

He had found himself a perfect view of the newly transformed cavern, from small railing weaved from tendrils just next to the band, and had spent most of the evening so far simply staring out with a misty-eyed gaze. His new, tailored suit fit him perfectly, the wine he drank in the tall glass he held was divine, and the mask over his face bordered his view with a perfect, silver frame. The golden lights shimmered above and around him like beautiful, burning stars, and he took the time to lazily admire the dancers scattered around the shiny, circular floor in front of him.

They moved ever-so gracefully, like swans on a mirrored lake, somehow perfectly in time with music they had never heard before, moving astoundingly in sync with partners they had met for the first time that night.

And yet, their dancing was magnificent, and Bad couldn't help but let his starry-eyed gaze linger on their bright patterns. How his guests managed to display such perfection on the spot was beyond him and part of the magic he didn't want spoiled. Hopefully, everything would go to plan with no hiccups, and it wouldn't be. He could keep the image imprinted in his mind for as long as he wanted it to be.

The demon inhaled the deep, rich aura of his own success. "All our hard work has finally led to this," he sighed. "It's magnificent!"

"It sure is," Ant agreed, standing beside him. "I can't remember the last time a ball was even thrown in these parts."

"Let's be grateful that the Egg has given us the opportunity to plan one, then," Bad reminded him. "The entertainment has been well deserved."

The red tendrils snaking around his horns tightened in vain agreement. Well deserved indeed, and a relief. With ache and exhaustion flooding his bones, Bad was satisfied to see it had all led to something worthwhile. The only thing that perhaps would have made the entire thing so much better was if Skeppy could have been there with them, sharing the moment. Alas, he wasn't, and the demon congratulated himself on managing to persuade him to stay away. He missed his company, sure, but if that was the price to pay to keep him out of tonight's event, then he was more than willing to pay it. He couldn't take any risks.

"Well deserved, or a pointless waste of precious time and money?" a voice grumbled beside them.

Bad couldn't help but roll his eyes. "Yes, Punz? Do you have some wisdom to share?"

He turned to look at the mercenary, who was leaning against a nearby tendril and glaring out over the festivities, a disgusted glint in his eyes. Despite his glowing, glittering mask and fine evening-wear, he was still a sour little muffin who clearly wanted a reason not to be there.

"I'm just asking why we can't just get it over and done with, and why I'm forced to attend," he muttered, taking a disdainful sip of his drink with a wrinkled nose and a sniff.

Bad wasn't going to let the evening get ruined by one grumpy guest, and kept his tone light. "You *are* a part of the Eggpire, Punz," he reminded him, "and like it or not, you're a guest of honour."

Punz scoffed. "At this point in my life, fuck honour. What's it ever done to help me? What do we even have to celebrate anyway?"

"Well, *I'm* happy to be here," Ponk jumped in after staying silent all this time. The collection of the crimson tendrils making up his new arm tightened at his words. "After all, the Egg has been more than good to me. I just think Mr. Mercenary here is still salty that he was fired from his job."

There was a crash as Punz crushed his glass in his fist, spilling wine and glass shards all over his gloved hand and the floor. He glared viciously at Ponk. Bad almost expected him to pull out one of his concealed weapons and slit his throat right there and then, but all that cut through the air was the tension between them, and the few, sharp words that followed.

"Be thankful I'm too kind to take your other arm!" the mercenary exploded.

"Language," Bad tutted, unfazed by his hostility. "We don't want to start a fight."

Another moment passed, before...

"I need to go take some fucking air."

Punz stormed away from the group in a flurry of white and gold. He pushed through the twirling swans Bad had been admiring, breaking their routine and earning himself hisses and indignant squawks as he went.

Ponk lifted his drink up to his lips again, visibly stifling a laugh. "Was it something I said?" he asked, very obviously feigning surprise.

Bad heard Ant sigh. "Don't worry, Punz is just being Punz. He must still be mad about failing to apprehend Puffy."

"Maybe we *did* underestimate her," the demon mused, downing another sip of rich red wine. "When she was with us, she was... *remarkable*. I can't blame him, though. I thought that since Eret was out for a traitor, we could kill two birds with one stone."

"I just never expected it to take such a toll on him," Antfrost said.

"He's a prideful warrior. Failure crushes him ten times more than all of us."

"Still, talk about a drama queen," Ponk tutted. His comment was met with a light laugh from all three of them.

The dancers had only just settled back into a rhythm, erasing Punz's dramatic exit as if it was merely a little inconvenience, a brief mistake carried by the music.

Just like them, Bad settled back into his own rhythm, simply standing and watching the gold and crimson smothered world. The music from the band – sat so close to him – pounded in his ears and almost rendered him deaf from the screeching of the violin. However, it was a comfortable, cosy sort of deaf, only momentarily broken up by his dear master's gleeful whispers and the light-hearted banter of his two friends.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bad glimpsed a large, hulking figure loitering in distance, behind a couple of the tendril pillars. When he turned to face it, he just had the time to see the sharp, white glare of dangerously sharp tusks and the hostile glint of two mean little eyes. The bulking shadow moved on. It was followed by another silhouette, this one tall and more human-like, that seemed so familiar. So... painfully familiar. Scarily familiar, even.

The spot they had briefly stood in seemed to brighten once the silhouettes had left, carrying their wake of war and stale blood somewhere else. They left no visible trace behind them, as light-footed and as invisible as ghosts – like the waiters lingering on the sidelines. Even so, Bad felt a light chill run up his spine.

"Do you know who Technoblade actually brought with him in the end?" he suddenly asked his friends.

"He turned up?" Antfrost sounded surprised.

"Apparently."

"Huh, I didn't think he would," the cat mewled. "Maybe Philza? We all know how close they are."

"He might have brought Ranboo," Ponk suggested, "but if he did, then that piglin is insane, and the kid even more so if he agreed. I'm surprised that he'd have the gall to show his face around here."

Bad kept quiet. Skeppy's words came back to him, and as he lifted up his glass to his lips again, he mumbled something he hoped the others didn't hear. "Maybe we *were* too harsh on him..."

"Why are you asking about Techno?" Antfrost asked suddenly, thankfully ignoring or straight-up oblivious to Bad's remorse.

But one bout of regret gave away to another, and this time, the demon couldn't pretend to hide it. "I think I saw Sam," he said, and the three of them fell quiet.

Even the orchestra had faltered, rushing to switch songs and tune their instruments while the dancers and other guests conversed in muffled whispers and giggles.

"Sam?" Ponk sounded terrified. Terrified or heartbroken, it was hard to tell.

"Yes."

The demon flicked his tail out behind him, agitated. He didn't dare glance at his companions or back at the Egg, instead deciding to focus on the crimson and golden room. Nevertheless, his eyes began to search for a ghost of their own accord, a green and gold phantom undoubtedly dripping with blood and vengeance, leaving terrifying trails around the room. The Mask of Green Death. The thought itself was enough to make Bad recoil, his suit tightening around his chest.

"Bad, you do know that he's—"

"Yes."

"And why would he be with Techno? I mean that's—"

"Yes, I know," he said, perhaps a bit too harshly. "It's most likely a trick of the light."

"Or the wine." There was amusement in Ant's purr, and Bad forced himself to relax.

"Drunkboy Bad," Ponk snickered.

"Oh come on," he sighed with a small grin. He was about to reprimand the both of them for the tease, but one question escaped him before he could cast it aside. "I can't be the only one who still thinks about him, right? Let's be honest for a moment."

The laughs began to fade until the three of them stood in complete silence. When it began to weigh down heavier, Bad turned to face them both, and found them in passive, unreadable states. Ant's head was turned down to the floor, his claws nervously tapping the glass in his hands, and Ponk was staring out across their empire of a cavern, a vacant look in his red eyes.

"I... I dreamed about him last night," Antfrost finally said in a quiet voice, briefly looking at Bad.

The demon nodded, hearing his confession, and turned to the other. "Ponk?"

The man stood silent for a few moments more, then took a swig of his drink. "Always," he muttered, with a tone Bad could only describe as lost.

He cleared his throat and raised his voice. "There," he said. "We've proven I'm not the only crazy one. I'm just seeing things."

Seeing things, of course. Nothing else

He stifled his anxiety with a raspy cough. *Nothing else.*

His gaze wandered once again around the room, until it landed on the outskirts of the dance floor. Guests breezed past each other on the wide walkways, occasionally stopping to share a greeting or compliment with a familiar face. The turnout had been enormous, and yet in the sea of silks, linen, and intricate masks, Bad still managed to pick out one particular figure he hadn't seen in a long time.

In fact, he was surprised that she had accepted the invite at all. Clearly, they *had* underestimated her, multiple times.

Bad handed his glass to the nearest waiter, and straightened his black and silver mask until it sat snugly once more over his face.

"I'll see you both later," he said to Ant and Ponk before he left. "Try to mingle with our guests, and have fun. Remember, smile and be welcoming. We want everyone to feel relaxed here. Tonight's going to be a good night for us all."

"We're making progress."

"We sure are."

Puffy's dress was getting considerably lighter as they walked, the pouring sand running down her legs over her hooves. In the golden lantern light, the trails they left looked like pure and utter magic. She looked around them briefly. "But we're getting strange looks."

She watched as Nikki twirled to follow her gaze, her dress billowing out and making the silk butterflies on it dance across a sea of silver. The captain half expected them to flutter away and paint the sky, before their material would weigh them down and they'd plummet like a pounding rain.

"Do you think they know what we're doing?" Nikki asked her.

"Doubt it," Puffy shrugged, "but we're not dancing, eating, drinking, or talking to anyone else apart from ourselves, and I don't think the excuse that of "don't know anybody here" will hold up."

Familiar faces and eyes crossed the captain's with every step and every misdirected glance.

"We can blame it on the masks," Nikki tutted, "but what will draw suspicions is you looking over your shoulder every five seconds."

"I'm worried, alright? I'm considered a traitor."

Her friend linked their arms, smiling wildly. "To the Egg and the Eggpire, maybe," she said, "not to anyone else."

Puffy huffed, nevertheless resting her hand on Nikki's forearm. "It may not matter what everyone else thinks," she agreed, "but have you noticed where we are?"

Just to prove her point, they both almost tripped over a particularly large tendril crossing the floor.

"Ah," Nikki replied, catching herself on the captain. "*Touché*..."

They took a moment to trail a bit of soul sand over the growth, and moved on. Now Nikki was clinging on to her side, Puffy felt a little more relaxed, and forced herself to smile.

"If you ignore the cultists attending this masquerade," she whispered to the girl, "it's actually got quite a welcoming atmosphere."

"There we go!" Nikki laughed, rubbing her arm. "There's a smile. Relax, everything is going to go smoothly."

For a moment there – thanks to the reassuring gestures and gentle voice – Puffy was almost convinced that everything was alright. Almost. The occasional glimpses of red eyes behind some of the attendees' bright smiles and colourful masks dragged her back to the reality she was attempting to destroy. In an effort to comfort herself, she peered through the crowds, over the vast open space of the dancefloor and between the pillars of crimson growths.

Somewhere in the distance in front of her, head considerably higher than most of the other guests, she could just make out Ranboo's tall, lanky figure, flanked by a pair of dark black wings and a man with jet-black hair. On the opposite side of the gargantuan room, separated by the vast, polished ocean of the ballroom floor, two more figures lingered in the shadows. One of them stopped briefly in the faint light of a burning torch, and stared at the two girls. Nikki gave them a small wave, before they all started to move on again.

Puffy began to feel just a little bit better now she had made sure all her other friends were alright. That meant however that she wasn't looking where she was going, and it was only a matter of time before she bumped into someone.

"Captain!" a tall figure of soft, velvet crimson exclaimed.

Mortified beyond belief, Puffy gave the monarch a low bow. "Your Majesty," she said, deeply apologetic. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking, and—"

King Eret motioned her to stand, and when she looked up, there was nothing but happiness in his eyes. "Look at you," he said, breathless, "you're radiant!" He turned to Nikki too. "Both of you!"

"And you are..." Puffy began, dizzy.

She gawked at him, dazzled by the rays of a thousand suns. A bright, rich red dress draped over Eret's tall, slender figure, hanging loosely in creased bunches like a toga, or a rose's crumpled petals. Pale eyes stared out from behind a light mask of gold, and a crown of laurel leaves rested on top of his mop of shining brown curls. Jewelry dripped off his whole body like golden streams, coating him with another air of magnificence and regality that Puffy hadn't even thought was possible to achieve.

"C'mon, you can say what you really think. I won't be mad," Eret chuckled, his deep voice betraying his fierce pride in his appearance.

"As magnificent as always," Puffy finally said with a bow.

"Thank you, but goodness! It feels like we haven't talked for ages. I have to say, it's been hard finding another trustworthy friend since you left my service."

Puffy felt a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be!" One of Eret's long, gentle fingers trailed under her chin and made her look back up. "As long as you're happy, that's all I want for you. However, if you ever want to come back, your title as my knight will always be yours to take." His genuine smile fell again, replaced by sudden bewilderment. He dropped his hand. "Why are you here? I was certain that the Eggpire was out for your head..."

"They are."

Eret gave her a puzzled look, visibly trying to understand her thought process and what risks she was taking, and why. As much as she would have leapt at the opportunity to warn him of that evening's oncoming "fireworks", she knew she couldn't, and said nothing. She was about to mention Techno, and the Commune, and— *oh, Sam's alive too!* Again, she had to stay quiet and discreet. So, she turned her gaze away from the monarch before his worried eyes could read her any further.

"Well, I do hope you girls have a lovely time," Eret said, still sounding somewhat suspicious of her motives.

"We're planning to," Nikki answered for the captain, "it's going to be wonderful!"

"Would it perhaps be too forward to ask you both to save a dance for me?"

"That can be arranged!" Puffy jumped back in, looking back at the king. Any chance she had to change the conversation, she'd take.

He seemed delighted, and somewhat humoured. "I just hope you won't be threatened by our height difference," he teased.

Somehow taller than Sam and the same height as Techno, minus the heavy bulk, Eret was indeed a force to be reckoned with. Dancing with him would prove to be an experience, but one that she was certain she'd find awfully amusing when it came about.

"I've taken down warriors bigger than you," Puffy clapped back with a cocky smile, her captain's ego boosted. "A few steps with you don't scare me."

"I'll take that as a vaguely threatening yes then," the king chuckled, and the three of them began to laugh.

A good proper laugh with King Eret was something she missed a lot, along with attending his lavish banquets and balls that he'd throw whenever he'd feel fit, inviting the court, the castle staff and the common people alike to come and attend. They were never events thrown for the purposes of showing off the Greater SMP's wealth, or asserting dominance over its neighbouring nation. They were organized for one reason and one reason only: to have fun, and to celebrate.

Sometimes, yes, diplomacy was on the table, but tensions hardly survived the evening. Even a couple of the Badlands' leaders took a moment or two to attend, but would take the opportunity to make their arrival known.

The doors to the banquet hall would be flung open in a fanfare of trumpets, and Bad would stride in, clothed in gold and a glittering smile. Arms outstretched, he would cry: "*Your Majesty—*"

"Your Majesty! So glad you could come to our quaint little celebration. You look magnificent!"

At the sound of the voice, Puffy tore her eyes away from Eret's glitzy figure, instead turning her attention to the one that currently approached them, his dark black skin

speckled with shimmering white, like trails of snowflakes brushed across the night sky. The captain froze. The cinched waist of her gown suddenly grew tighter around her as pure terror took hold of her.

"Good evening to you too, Bad," King Eret said with a small, well-mannered curtsy to the host.

Bad nodded. His eyes wandered from Eret, only to land on the captain a moment later. "Oh my... Puffy?" he gasped a little too dramatically, and she took a deep breath.

Weak, trembling knees threatened to buckle underneath her, and her mouth ran dry. If Nikki hadn't been holding on to her arm, she was certain that she would have collapsed right there and then.

"I..."

She couldn't even say anything, fear paralyzing her where she stood. This was the creature that had befriended then outlawed her, wanted her head and had even sent a *child* after her. With the almighty and noble airs the Egg had bestowed upon him, she hadn't thought he would be out mingling with his guests, let alone running into her. She hadn't thought that possibility through, too caught up in the plan, and her outfit, and her renewed friendship with Nikki, and—

Help me, she pleaded silently, attempting to gulp down the iron ball rising in her throat, *I'm about to die...*

And yet, when she crossed Bad's gaze, she was only met with gentle kindness in his pearly, red rimmed eyes, partially hidden by a silver and black facemask. It was a kindness she had missed, and it was one the Egg had slowly corrupted over time.

"My goodness, it's been ages!" the demon exclaimed, arms outstretched. "How are you?"

She still could not tell if he was being genuine or not, and she stayed wary. "I'm... fine."

You're fine, Captain. More than fine, in fact.

"That's excellent!" Bad clapped his hands together, visibly delighted, and let his gaze wander over to Nikki by her side. "You ladies look absolutely gorgeous!"

It was clearly a genuine compliment, but there was still an edge to the word "gorgeous", as if it was forced. It wasn't out of awe and admiration like Nikki, Ranboo or Eret's

comments, or with the soft tone Sam's unprompted remark of "You look beautiful" had. It seemed overly polite, at best.

Nikki was unquestionably a better actress than Puffy at that moment, with her light giggle and over-the-top eyeroll the captain had only ever seen the pettiest of aristocrats do. "Really, Bad," she tsked, "you're too kind! You look lovely too."

"Thank you!" The demon briefly smoothed down his red and silver suit, before staring once more at Puffy. He gave her an odd look – eyes half-narrowed under his mask and a raised eyebrow. It was almost as if he was questioning her presence.

She shifted from foot to foot, seeking some sort of reassurance in Nikki's grip on her arm. Before she could stop herself, one of her hooves began to nervously scratch at the wooden floor with embarrassingly loud tapping. If Bad didn't notice that, then he must have been blind *and* deaf.

"I was about to ask Their Majesty here if they wanted to take a walk with me, but I don't think they'll mind if I ask to invite you instead." Bad turned his head to Eret. "Would they?"

The king, despite the pleading glances Puffy tried to shoot his way, shook his head with a smile. "It'll take more than that to offend me," he chuckled, and the captain's heart sank.

"Puffy?"

She looked back, and found Bad staring at her expectantly. "Sorry?" she pushed out, almost tripping over her own tongue.

"I wanted to know if you would give me the honour of taking a small walk with me, for old time's sake."

The implications finally began to set in. Alone, or mostly alone, with Bad. The undisputed leader of the Eggpire, the horned beast who had trapped Sam above the Egg and later left him to die in the Vault, the demon who dared to try and indoctrinate her own son *and* Tommy, the creature who had pushed Ranboo into the void of madness, the—

"I... don't know."

If she said yes, then she would be signing her own death warrant. If she said no, she'd be raising many questions that she would not be ready to answer. I don't know. That was a good enough answer, at least for her.

Bad barely reacted. "Ah, well..." He trailed off, his face falling, before another smile lit it up once again. "Eret, we haven't seen each other for ages either."

All of a sudden, Bad's almost exclusive attention on her had been erased, and it was like she didn't even exist. She exhaled a small, relieved sigh. That was until someone spun her around, away from Bad and Eret.

As the two of them entered into their own little realm conversation, Nikki dragged Puffy off to the side. The captain was still close enough to hear what the demon and the king were saying, and couldn't help but eavesdrop.

"In all honesty, I wasn't expecting you to accept our generous invitation."

"I wasn't expecting to either, but I am more than prepared to do anything in order to keep peace between our nations. It's a precious thing and it never seems to last long enough."

"You trust me then?"

"Oh, I wouldn't go there, exactly!" The captain heard Eret chuckle. "You did steal a decent portion of my territory out from under my feet, then boldly came and asked for more."

"And yet you haven't tried to take it back by force."

"As I said, peace is fleeting. You can keep that corner of the land."

"What about our previous discussions?"

"Perhaps we could discuss those two strips of territory some other time."

From the tone the king was using, Puffy knew that there wasn't a single shred of anything that would suggest he'd so much as linger on the offer. That's all that deal would stay: a vague "maybe".

"I see." Bad sounded somewhat apprehensive.

"And hopefully no more tendrils will need to be thrown against my castle for it, now will they?"

The demon didn't reply.

Eret changed his tune. "I have to say, Bad, I was a little skeptical about the venue at first, but I like what you've done to the place."

"Thank you, thank you. We certainly tried."

"And I'm also glad you could come to your senses as well, about the Eggpire, I mean. I know it may have been considerably harder to do so, with Sam's passing and all."

Puffy looked around. Bad's body had noticeably tensed up, and although he was smiling, she could see it was forced. His eyelid twitched, as did one of his pointed ears.

"Well, I'm certain that if he was here, he'd want this to be a peaceful gathering too," he chuckled dryly, sharply ending that conversation.

"Don't you see? This is a perfect opportunity," Nikki suddenly whispered, blocking Puffy's view of the demon.

She frowned. "What is?"

"Spending time with Bad! Maybe we could get some information out of him!"

"You want me to just go off with him?! Nikki, he tried to *kill me*, multiple times too!"

"But you used to be friends, didn't you?"

"That was before *he tried to kill me in the name of the Egg!* And just in case you haven't noticed—" She gestured to the tendrils curving over the rocks and forming the pillar they stood next to. "—we're right in the middle of it's lair!"

"He seems to be acting pleasantly enough. Come on, Puffy! This is a chance we can't waste. The more things we know, the better. They might even save our lives at some point."

Puffy let her friend's words sink in, and thought them over. She would do anything to help secure a victory and get rid of the Egg, but she still felt unquestionably worried and uneasy. She didn't say anything.

"I promise that if anything were to happen, we will be right there to help you," Nikki said, tipping her resolve.

Puffy finally sighed, and tugged down her dress in resignation, pricking tiny holes in a couple more of the sand bags underneath as she went. "Fine, I'll do it," she reluctantly agreed, "but if I do end up dying, I'm haunting you for the rest of your remaining lives."

A smile illuminated Nikki's face with amusement, but the kindness and concern in her eyes was genuine enough to banish any and all misgivings Puffy had against her.

"I'll have to prepare then if you do. Do ghosts like cookies?"

"I don't know," the captain replied with a wave and a smirk, heading back towards Eret and Bad. *And I don't particularly want to find out.*

When she reached the two others again, she forced herself to be friendly and hide her suspicions. "You still up for that stroll, Bad?" she asked, feigning to be charmed and honoured by his presence.

The demon's eyes lit up – as if he hadn't expected her to accept his offer – then he grinned and gave her a bow. "Of course, anything for a friend!"

Then King Eret, Captain Puffy's final rope, also gave them a little reverence of his own, snapping the last string of hope she had to escape her predicament.

"I'll see you during dinner, then," he said, before striding over to Nikki and striking up a friendly and nostalgic conversation.

Meanwhile, Bad began to lead Puffy away, down the wide crimson arteries of the masquerade's venue. "We have a lot to catch up on," he hummed.

Puffy only hoped that their "catching up" wouldn't result in her swinging from the Egg's gallows.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Drowning Fear

Karl Jacobs had only been to one masquerade ball during his life. Well, one of his lives. A past life, if you will. Another ball in another place, in another time, during another life. Enough said.

It didn't end well. It didn't end well for him, and for the guests; friends he had just met that day, two of whom slaughtered the rest in cold blood. *In cold blood*, and funnily enough to appease a crimson Egg.

Was it the same Egg, or a different one? An ancestor of the current, perhaps? Karl had seen many things throughout his journeys, but he could only maybe explain a handful of them, and remember even less. The question of the Egg was merely one of those many mysteries.

He didn't know why he really accepted the invitation to the Badlands' banquet. The red flags were everywhere – quite literally! Maybe it was because of what he told the Council: it was a simple, harmless show of diplomacy between their two nations. There was nothing wrong with that.

He had an inkling however that that wasn't everything. There was an unsettling, macabre curiosity behind his willingness to go, to see if history was going to repeat itself, or maybe even try to prevent it from doing so himself.

He wore the mask he had managed to keep from the previous masquerade. Although it had aged – its colours fading and a strange smell emanating from the itchy surface that stroked his skin – and certainly didn't match the rest of his silk robes that shone brilliantly in the candlelit cavern, he had settled on it anyway.

Was it dumb of him to do so? Yes.

Would the Egg somehow recognize him from it? If it was the same one hundreds of years later, then yes, it was likely it would.

Would it take revenge on him? Yes. It probably wouldn't even hesitate.

But so far, Karl was alive. He was alive, mingling with people he didn't even know, and acting very much like the leader of the great nation Kinoko Kingdom was. He hadn't heard so much as a hiss from the Egg itself, the bulbous mass sitting silently at the far end of the room. That was fine by him, although he always felt slightly uneasy when a masked guest would brush past and cast a scarlet glance towards him.

The luxurious surroundings, as well as the stink of alcohol and musk of revelry was familiar, quite literally dragging his mind back to the past, but so were the clear and blatant signs of an infection, a crimson horror slowly sneaking into everyone's minds and cups.

Thankfully, he had George with him. Not for defensive purposes, but as moral support. What would he do without George. He turned to look at his friend.

They both stood out, their bright, colourful clothes clashing against the surrounding palette of red, black, gold and the occasional white. George was buttoned up into a sky-blue suit, complete with silver highlights and a mushroom-speckled mask. He spun around, decidedly lost and dazzled by the world around them.

"It's so... green— *no, wait!* Gold! No..."

"Red," Karl told him, trying to hide his amusement, "the whole place is red, George."

George frowned, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "Red, got it," he said, clearing his throat.

Karl tutted and turned away, stifling a little laugh. He had told the Council that he had taken George with him because of his high-society expertise as an ex-monarch. However, he knew perfectly well that George had none of that, or if he did that he didn't want to remember anything to do with it. Karl respected his wishes.

In all honesty, all he needed was a friend. He'd be a fool to admit that he was the loneliest he had ever been these past few months. At least George was there for him, even if it was just out of sheer concern and fear of his fits – his prophecies, whatever they were. No matter what this evening brought, he wanted to share the nice parts with a friend.

"Karl, are you alright?"

The leader of Kinoko glanced back at his friend, who's face had seemingly slipped back into the same, wide and worried state it always twisted to when Karl was shaken by anything, anything at all.

He nodded. "Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, this isn't the most friendly neighborhood to linger in," George continued, looking around them. "We could leave if you want to."

That would have been fine by him. The diplomatic visit had somewhat been fulfilled – he had been greeted courteously and had shaken hands with Bad and Antfrost. He had even offered his condolences to them about Sam. That should have been enough, and yet now a political visit was no longer on the table, only curiosity remained.

It might have also seemed strange, but Karl wanted to stay. He felt like he *needed* to stay, and he always knew that his gut feeling was to be listened to. There was something about the masquerade that felt homely, familiar, as if all the pieces of his existence were gathered in one place.

Everything, from his travels, the ages long lost, his kingdom, his friends and his whole heart. This wasn't the work of the Egg. Karl had known a long time ago that he was immune to its charms and tantalizing hisses. He just couldn't explain it: it was like he was *complete*, once again. Everything was here, catering to the deepest desires of his soul, and where it all was, he would stay for as long as he could.

"Maybe we should attend the whole ball," Karl said to George. "It's only polite."

His friend looked at him with a raised eyebrow, but stayed silent. It was as if he was trying to decipher him, trying to break into his inner code and turmoil in an attempt to talk some sense into him.

George should have known that trying to understand Karl was like decoding an ancient cipher: so much mystery, inconsistencies and wrong turns. Even the man himself knew that.

"I have a feeling about tonight," Karl continued as a way of explanation, "we should stay."

"I'm assuming that anything I say won't matter, then," sighed George.

"I'm sorry, but no. We should stay."

"But Karl, Dream is out, he's running wild! And what about Sapnap too, I mean, who's to say that—"

"We're staying, George," Karl said sharply, the selfless care suddenly suffocating him, "and that's final."

He didn't know why. He just felt he had to, no matter what the night would bring. He adjusted his butterfly mask, aware of a million, age-old red eyes and glowing spores watching his every movement.

He had a feeling he couldn't leave even if they wanted to.

Like most of his peers, it seemed, Ranboo was never one to go to balls and banquets. He was never close enough to power – or "decent" powers, as some would say – to be invited to such gatherings. Well, there was L'Manberg, but the nation with a history of carnage during those events was partial to much more private affairs, like small birthday celebrations or occasional bonfire and barbecue nights. Nothing like the scale of the luxurious balls dripping with riches and silks that the Greater SMP would throw within the walls of their monarch's castle.

The Red Banquet was Ranboo's first ever ball, and like a nervous debutant, he fretted over too much. He worried over his hair, his clothes, his manners, and the soul sand he was sneakily trailing behind him – just normal things.

He tried to shuffle right behind Philza and Sapnap, the only two people near him he knew he could trust, but they all soon realized that it was more of a hindrance than a help.

"Ranboo, mate, I think we need to spread out a little more," Philza said as they finally approached their designated destination – the far wall of the cavern. "Look, there's no one back here! You have nothing to worry about!"

Ranboo lingered by their side for a few moments more, then nodded and found the courage to move further away. He opened two more bags of sand, and got to work.

The floors were a lot more even where they were assigned to, although quite a few clusters of tendrils still lingered and peeped out of the woodworks. More floor meant more space to cover, however, and a bigger job. The hybrid silently praised Techno for sending three of them around there. Maybe they would even have enough sand to coat the entire area twice over.

He made sure no one else was watching them, and then followed Philza and Sapnap's lead, crisscrossing their paths across the dark floor and emptying bag after bag. When he had to stop to grab a refill, the hybrid would glance up and keep checking that their

whereabouts were kept as secretive as possible, and every time the music picked up again and the droning murmurs of guests kept going, he turned back to his work.

Oblivious – that's what everyone was to their plan. That was good, ignorance was good.

Ignorance was bliss.

In an effort to relax his tense body and get a move on with his task at hand, Ranboo turned to one of his meager, mindless games: he began to hum along to the orchestra's tune.

Ranboo had a knack for guessing music. He could hear a random melody for the first time, and somehow perfectly guess the following pattern of notes, matching his humming to the key. He was never a musical guy, or a prodigy in any way. It was just a comforting little pastime he took part in when he could. It was a strange little quirky talent of his, like how Tommy knew how to whistle the L'Manberg anthem backwards while doing a series of cartwheels, or how Tubbo burned every food he made except for a specific honey pancake recipe.

He had to talk to him about that, actually, and maybe give him a couple of impromptu cooking lessons. Michael loved the sugary treats, but the hybrid doubted a diet of solely those would do him any good.

Maybe, after the Egg is gone and things are sort of patched up, I could be a real father to Michael again.

The thought of a quiet, domestic life made him smile. Yeah, he needed something to look forward to.

He was so lost in his own world and his daydream that he didn't notice the hisses creeping into his mind, increasing their volume by the minute until they were all he could hear. They drowned out all the happy little imaginings Ranboo had conjured up – from the lovely, cozy little nights with Tubbo and Michael by the fire, to small fishing trips along the Snowchester coast, or even visits to the Antarctic Commune to visit dear old "Uncle Techno". Instead, all they left were two words.

Kill them, Butler.

Ranboo froze, eyes wide. Philza and Sapnap kept rushing to and fro, and seemed to pay no mind to the hybrid's sudden halt. He looked around.

Kill them.

"Who are you?" he whispered under his breath, gulping. The falling sand from one of his bags began to pile on the tip of his boot, wasting precious fuel. He was too terrified and startled to care.

He received no answer, except: *Kill them.*

The clothes and mask he wore were made for him, so much so that they began to stick, age-old material itching into his skin and trying to crawl inside of him. It was as if the old owner was trying to melt them both into one from beyond the grave, roped together by a simple shirt, a red silk tie, a black waistcoat and a jeweled mask.

Kill them.

Ranboo's hands began to tremble with anticipation, and he balled them into fists. "No," he squeaked. "They're my friends."

Kill them, Butler.

"I'm not a butler." The endearing tease from Puffy was suddenly a lot more frightening now. "I don't have to listen to you."

You, you, you. Who was "*you*" exactly? The voice hissed and spat like a scarlet flame, but he could understand it perfectly. It wasn't the Egg, was it? It couldn't be, could it?

He looked up. A smooth, curved and crimson surface greeted him, layered with crowns of thorns and twisted growths. He stepped back.

Butler, it called him, with a soft, amicable rumble, as if it was greeting an old friend.

"I'm not a butler," Ranboo said again, more and more unsure. As the name was continuously drilled into his head, it began to stick.

"Ranboo, get away from there!"

A warm, gloved grip yanked him away from the Egg's towering mass, and the hybrid stumbled backwards. Sapnap's eyes burned into his from behind his crescent-moon mask, fiery and stern.

"We're not here to talk to the Egg," he said.

"I wasn't talking to it."

"You were!"

"I was telling it to leave me alone."

"Same difference."

James.

They both turned their heads back to the Egg.

"It called you 'James'," Ranboo said.

"Yeah, no shit, I heard that," Sapnap replied, annoyed. He turned back to the Egg and although his brow was furrowed and his words were sharp, the hybrid could tell he was startled. "My name's not James, dickhead!" he spat at it. "Get it right!"

James.

"It's deaf," said Sapnap, glancing at Ranboo, "or it's dumb, or both."

Kill him.

The two simple words burned Ranboo's ears as they were branded into his brain. They sent a sudden, electric jolt throughout his whole body. It wouldn't have been the first time the Egg had demanded he murder one of his friends, and it wouldn't be the first time that he would have attempted it if he had a weapon on hand.

He *would* have attempted it?

The mere thought suddenly terrified him, and he was quick to clap his hands over his ears.

"I'm not going to kill him," he said defiantly, and then, as an afterthought: "screw off!"

The heated hand landed on his shoulder, still unbearably warm through the heavy oilskin gloves and the shirt on his back.

"It must be losing its mind," Sapnap said, and Ranboo admired his nonchalance when faced with a death threat.

"Or maybe..." Ranboo looked down at their clothes, pensive. "It thinks we're someone else..."

"Huh?"

The rusty cogs in his brain began to churn. "What if these clothes belonged to disciples of the Egg, and he knows them?"

Sapnap was still giving him a blank look. "What?"

"What if the Egg has been here for thousands of years, and other cults have been built and have fallen around it? What if this is the second time these clothes are meeting it?"

"You're being ridiculous—"

"But *what if*—"

"You've got more ghost stories in your head than memories. All that writing's got to your head." He scoffed. "Ghost stories..."

And yet, Ranboo knew from Sapnap's shift in demeanor and from the tremor in his voice that he was starting to believe his words. There was no way to really know if that was a relief or not.

"Come on," said the fireborn, proceeding to empty another bag of soul sand around the Egg's roots. "We may as well get this part over and done with."

The hybrid followed suit, using up two small bundles just to make sure the Egg's roots were properly covered. There was a brief moment where he wondered if the Egg could sense their true intentions and he tried to spread the sand a little more discreetly, but all it kept hissing at him were the executions of multiple death warrants.

Kill him, kill her, kill them. Kill anyone he laid his eyes on, kill the rare few souls who happened to wander around the back of the room. Kill people by names he had never heard before, such as James, Lyaria or Oliver, *come on, Butler, and make it quick*—

Sapnap was probably right: the Egg *had* lost its mind, but Ranboo still felt like the connection ran so much deeper. He suspected as much.

He ignored most of what it said, but a couple of hissed insults did hit their mark, and began to overwhelm him.

"Ranboo, mate, you alright?"

"Yeah," he sniffed, briefly taking off his mask and wiping his eyes with the back of his hand as Phil walked over to him. "It's just... a lot."

The avian wrapped one of his wings around his back, shielding him from any unwanted attention as he calmed down. The canvas of the braces flapped in the warm cavern air, and their metal frames creaked and tinkled with every movement.

"I know, mate, I know," Philza said, rubbing the hybrid's shoulder, "but you're doing great so far. You're very brave to have wanted to come along. It'll all be done soon."

Ranboo nodded, hoping dearly that would be the case. All he really wanted to do that evening was spend the night in Snowchester with Tubbo and Michael, curl up with them in front of the fireplace and hibernate until the cold months thawed into spring. He wanted to be with his loved ones again – not that the Syndicate weren't included in that category. He loved them all and saw them as another half of his family, but their tasks and missions always involved some dangerous venture or other, all to appease a grudge of some sort. He would fight with them until his last breath, but he wanted to stay safe, at least for a while. Was that too much to ask? Apparently so.

"Phil," he asked all of a sudden, "could I read you some of my poems?"

He never really shared his writing with anyone, except for Sam – then again that was when he was half-unconscious and hopefully didn't remember anything. A burst of courage struck him like lightning, pushing him to share with Phil. It would reassure him, more than anything.

The avian ruffled his hair. "Let's see how tonight turns out," he said, "alright?"

Ranboo sighed, and nodded, "Alright."

"Good boy."

The hand that tousled his hair did so a little rougher, then drifted back down to the hilt of his golden cane. The wing was removed from around them, and Ranboo was revealed once again to the blood-red reality of the Red Banquet. He hurried to put his mask back on, and averted his gaze away from the Egg. He instead concentrated on the long tables carefully being set up on a long platform stretching out before them.

"I think they're starting to set up the feast," the hybrid noted aloud.

He expected Philza to answer, and he could still feel his presence next to him, but he was met with a chilling silence. He turned to the avian, watching as he gazed up at the bulbous red mass of death watching over them.

He reached out and tugged at the sleeve of his red suit. "Phil?" he probed. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, quite alright thank you," the avian hummed, sounding strangely satisfied.

His tone was too calm to be comforting or genuine in any way. Ranboo gripped his arm, understanding trickling throughout his entire being. He tried to drag Philza away.

"Sapnap," he hissed to the fireborn, who was still deeply engrossed in his task at hand a couple of steps away, "we need to get Philza away from the Egg. Now."

His friend raised his head and upon seeing the avian's attitude, along with the hybrid's struggle, he rushed to help. "*Shit*," he muttered, grabbing Phil's other arm. "We need to warn Technoblade."

"About what?" Phil interrupted, attempting to shrug them both off. "I'm perfectly fine. I'm not going to keel over!"

Ranboo and Sapnap held him back as he tried to walk towards the Egg once again.

"Philza, please," Ranboo gasped, trying to dig his heels into the ground. Gods, that avian was *strong*! "Just come with us."

"A'ight, Grandpa," Sapnap huffed, "let's get you back to bed."

That was a less elegant way to put it to be sure, but at this point they needed something, anything to get Philza out from his brainwashed state.

The avian started the thrash around a lot harder, and his two restraints had to really fight to keep him in line. "Let me go!" he squawked.

Ranboo for one was definitely not going to. "Phil, please, let's just get away from here—"

"

A dark black wing began to beat down on his head, and he let go with a pained cry. Beside him, Sapnap cursed out loud and also dropped Phil's arm, rubbing his head.

"Philza, now's not the time for games," the fireborn said.

The way Phil's feathers had puffed up, along with his messy hair and crumpled suit, made him look decidedly less threatening than he tried to be. He looked crazy, like a scrawny chicken with a grudge, protecting its dear little Egg. Wide, haunting eyes glared at them from behind his feathered mask. The only thing that truly made him dangerous was the long, needle-thin blade with the crow's head handle, pulled from its inconspicuous cane-like scabbard. The sharp point was trained on Ranboo, and the hybrid gulped.

He ran behind Sapnap for cover, cowering and gripping his arm. Like a heated pipe, the warmth began to seep into his palms until they burned, and he let go with a yelp.

The fireborn stood his guard, standing tall. "Philza, don't test me," he threatened. "I'm not above knocking out an old man."

"And I'm not above ripping enemies of the Egg into shreds!" the avian yelled back, lunging forward, the foil slicing through the air like a silver lightning strike.

There was the sudden, sickening sound of a fist connecting with flesh and before Ranboo knew it, Philza had fallen backwards in a flurry of feathers.

Appalled, the hybrid turned to Sapnap, who was rubbing his glove, guilt smeared across his face.

"Sapnap—"

"Yeah?"

Ranboo blinked at him. "You... You just—"

"I *did* warn him." The fireborn headed over to the unconscious avian's side. He lightly poked him with the toe of his boot, and when he didn't stir, he sighed in relief. "This will make our job much easier."

Ranboo kept staring, eyes wide and mouth dry. Then, he realized that this was the best case scenario, and nodded. "Good job."

"Thank you. Now, let's get him away from here."

Ranboo toddled over, and on the count of three, he and Sapnap both lifted Philza up from the ground. He was surprisingly light and even with his wings and their moulded braces trailing limply behind him, he weighed no more than a couple of pounds of feathers. They hooked his arms around their shoulders – Ranboo bending down to

Sapnap's height – and prepared to make a move for it. At the last moment, a silver and golden glint on the floor caught his eye, and the hybrid crouched down to pick it up.

"Oh no, you don't." Sapnap was quicker, and snatched up Phil's sword. "With the Egg trying to get you to kill everything that breathes, I'm not handing you a murder weapon on a silver platter."

Ranboo held back a retort, knowing that the fireborn was right. It was better if he didn't touch a blade, so he watched as his friend re-sheathed the foil and hooked the cane around his belt. They shifted Philza's ragdoll body up into a more comfortable position, and started to walk away. The further they got from the Egg, the less the whispers began to torment Ranboo, and the more he began to forget their insufferable threats.

"Well, I didn't think the evening would go like this."

Ranboo felt Sapnap shift and stumble, likely tripping over one of Philza's wings that got caught under their feet. The hybrid was having a hard time keeping out of their way himself.

"Sapnap," he asked, "how far do we need to take him?"

"Back to the tundra would be preferable, but that ain't happening. We'll find a spot near the entrance."

"Won't the guards say something about that?"

"Fuck the guards. We'll just say he got drunk and passed out."

Ranboo nodded slowly, not entirely convinced by his friend's suggestion. "I can't hear the Egg anymore," he said helpfully.

They came to a halt, and the fireborn shot him a look. "Since when?"

"Uhh, maybe two or three minutes ago?"

"Well, why didn't you say so!"

Sapnap removed Philza's arm from around his shoulders, unceremoniously bundling up his feathered wings too and unloaded the whole off to the side, against an orange copper banner that lined the cavern wall. Ranboo tried to be a little more gentle, shuffling the avian's unconscious body into a position that made him look like he was sleeping – he'd much rather have Philza looking like he was acting his age rather than

him being discarded like a corpse. He stepped back after fiddling with Phil's mask, and made sure everything was alright. The slow, regular rising and falling of his chest reassured Ranboo that his friend was fine, at least for now.

"And to think we dragged him around for longer than we should have..."

Ranboo looked to the side, slightly unnerved by Sapnap's tone and recent attitude. He found the fireborn leaning against the wall a little next to Philza, his mask off and swinging from his arm. His bright blue eyes gazed out at the masquerade, distracted by every rustling skirt or cape that wandered past, and drawn to every chiming laugh and clinking of glasses. His stance seemed relaxed, but his face was twisted into a pensive expression. It was something Ranboo had never seen on his normally fiery and wild features. The fireborn looked lost, but in a way that made the hybrid think that he had accepted that.

"I never liked these kinds of festivities," he said.

Ranboo wanted to say something. He wanted to reassure his friend, remind him that Sam was clearly hesitant about balls too, then playfully offer to knock him out to join Phil in the sweet abyss of unconsciousness. He had a feeling however that he wasn't meant to do any of that. He kept his ears open and alert to his friend's words, and his mouth shut. He took his mask off too.

Sapnap sighed. "I was the entertainment for all of the ones I was dragged into," he began, embarking on a memory lane Ranboo never actually asked to travel.

That said, the hybrid was more than ready to listen to his friend. Clearly, he needed it, and it could kill some time until Philza came to and they could diagnose his state.

"You'd think that these people had never seen a fireborn before. They'd stare at me and my fire shows like I was a freak. My master made a pretty penny off that fact, I can tell you that much. I never saw a cent for my trouble, but I didn't say anything about it." The fireborn shrugged, pouting. "You don't think too much about these things when you're a kid, but when you're older you finally realize how fucked up some of that shit was. You and Tommy aren't the only kids that have been wronged."

Ranboo had never claimed that they had been. Anyway, he wasn't exactly a kid anymore: both him and Tubbo were teetering on the edge of their teenage years, and although Tommy was a year younger than them, so was he. They weren't so much children as very young adults, although the hybrid knew that the transition between the two would be smooth, and practically unnoticed. It wasn't like the world would change to

accommodate their coming-of-age. It had shown quite blatantly that it had been doing so since before they were even teens.

Yet there was still something unbelievable and otherworldly about someone like Sapnap also having some childhood baggage that he needed to unpack. It was hard to think of fierce, battle hardened warriors such as him, or Sam, or even Technoblade being small and decidedly weaker husks of their present selves. Ranboo couldn't imagine them being anything else than what they were – although he couldn't stop to picture or remember much anyway, but that was besides the point.

"If Dream and George hadn't found me and persuaded me to travel with them when I finally managed to escape my master's claws," Sapnap said, "I don't know what I would have done. I hate Dream for a lot of things, but I've got to love him for that, for what he used to be."

The fireborn slipped off one of his gloves, humming when the glowing veins under his skin began to crackle. Ranboo watched as Sapnap flicked his hand, summoning a small flame that he then began to roll between his fingers. The flame turned into a ball, a weightless mass that leaked through his friend's hands like dripping lava. Sapnap worked it through his touch as if it was no more than a coin, a mindless distraction.

"My fire displays used to be the envy of the aristocracy 'round where I used to live."

To demonstrate, he tossed the flaming ball up into the air. It hovered for a hot second, burning brightly against the crimson and scarlet landscape, then exploded in the shape of a magnificent phoenix. It grew to twice its size, somersaulting in the air before diving back to its birther's hand. In the blink of an eye, it was over, and the fireborn began to dance the small flame between his fingers once again.

Sapnap had kept insisting that the occasional shows he put on for the likes of Techno and Philza against the bleak landscape of the Antarctic Commune were all blown out of proportion when recounted.

This was the first time Ranboo remembered seeing Sapnap's artistry, and he was dumbfounded. For once, there had been no exaggeration in Technoblade's tales.

A few guests who had the honour of seeing the spectacle clapped politely, Ranboo along with them. Sapnap returned the ovation with a sharp glare and a scowl.

"Those bastards exploited me," he spat, just low enough so Ranboo could hear, and just sharply enough to make him shiver, "thinking they were so high and mighty. I can see

them now, in these people's gowns, and the suits, and their stuck-up manners. Nothing's ever enough for people like them. They want some entertainment? They like my fire displays? I'll give them a show alright..."

"Technoblade said we mustn't hurt anyone," Ranboo reminded him.

"I'm not planning to. I'm not going to hurt *people*. This Egg corrupted you and Bad, Ranboo. It almost killed Sam and Techno, and look what it's done to Phil. This display will be an exclusive, if you will. One night only – and it'll be the last one the Crimson will ever see."

"Keep your voice down!" Ranboo yelled, grabbing his arm.

He began to cast furtive glances all around them, terrified that something or someone had heard them. If they were found out, then it was game over before it had even started.

Sapnap scoffed in his ear, "What, are you scared it will hear me?"

"Yes, but not just the Egg. The people too. Techno said you need to keep a low profile."

"Don't worry, Ranboo!" The fireborn laughed again. "These people have always turned a blind eye to me until I put on a show for them. Fire or blood, it doesn't matter. They pay attention to me when I draw my sword or flare up kingdoms, not when I'm trying to defend my innocence or staggering through a masquerade with a blood stain on my shirt and an unconscious crow around my shoulders."

The comment was meant to be taken in a light-hearted way, but there was still a bitterness that Ranboo couldn't ignore. His paranoid grip on the fireborn's arm became looser, and he instead stooped down to hug him. Sapnap tried to shrug him off, but he stayed put.

"I'll burn you," his friend threatened.

"I dare you," the hybrid replied, smiling when all Sapnap did was sigh and lean into him, defeated.

"You're *damn lucky* that Techno's so attached to you, or I'd go feral and you'd have lost another life by now."

"What's so wrong with a hug?"

Ranboo never understood the 'I'm a tough guy, don't give me affection' syndrome a few of his friends were down with.

"Ender Boy, I was born in fire and burned down an entire kingdom. It's just not my thing."

"Sam lets me hug him," Ranboo pointed out.

"He's always been a gentle giant, you know that."

"Philza lets me hug him."

"Old man craves affection, 's nothing new."

"*Technoblade* lets me hug him."

Sapnap fell silent.

"Well played," he mumbled, trying to shrug the hybrid off him. This time, Ranboo let him, and stepped back.

"I really doubt you don't like hugs," Ranboo said to him. "No one *doesn't* like hugs."

"It's just hard to lean back into them when you've been deprived for so long."

"I could change that, if you want me to."

"Nah, I'm fine." Sapnap turned to him, smiling sadly. "It won't be the same."

The same as what, or who? Ranboo had forgotten, and he didn't want to consult his memory book anytime soon. He just had to respect Sapnap, just like Sapnap respected him. That he could do.

"Sapnap?"

The fireborn's name hung in the air for a brief, startling moment. Ranboo said nothing, locking his eyes onto Sapnap. His friend had tensed up, but still kept his eyes turned towards the dancing crowd through the tendrils.

Ranboo had only met and heard Karl Jacobs once, and from afar. He never thought he'd so much as remember him, let alone recognize his tone of voice.

He kept his eyes locked onto Sapnap, silently begging him for directions. The fireborn said nothing; he looked far too startled and nervous to do so.

Someone moved into their line of vision, tentatively approaching Sapnap with all the hesitancy of a human approaching a deer, with light footsteps and an increasing dread of the animal prancing away. But the animal stayed put, his crossed arms tightening around his sides, and his eyes still unmoving – almost unblinking, even.

"Sapnap. Is... is that really you...?"

A shaking hand reached out, somewhat scared to reach out and stroke the statue-like fireborn, as if he was a priceless artifact. He looked like he could break with the slightest contact, crumble and explode into ashes. The hand retracted.

Ranboo turned his head a little, meeting a shining display of green and magenta silks that contrasted sharply from the red masquerade around them, from the other guests and the fireborn's white and gold figure in front of him.

Finally, Sapnap seemed to take note of the newcomer. "Karl," he mumbled under his breath, finally lifting his gaze.

"Sapnap?"

Another voice joined them, this time in the form of a blue-clad man with pale, porcelain skin and rich brown hair. Again, Ranboo had only seen him once, but he still recognized him. His reputation preceded him. *'The man with the pretty privilege'*, many describe him as. *'Dream's little monarch'* was another. The hybrid had heard those terms so often that he had almost forgotten the man's actual name.

Sapnap, of course, did not. How could he? How could he forget one of his best friends?

"George?"

Ranboo noted however that his tone was not as high and rejoicing as it should have been. Seeing a best friend so close to someone else – especially when that someone in question was the love of your life who exiled you –, almost hanging off his arm, must have been hard, so the hybrid figured that Sapnap absolutely had the right to feel somewhat betrayed.

Sometimes, it startled Ranboo to realize how much he actually remembered and actually knew. His mind was truly a mystery.

"What are you doing here?"

Karl looked and sounded astonished, or astonished as he could be with his soulful silver eyes. Ranboo briefly saw him and George glance down towards Philza's passed out form, and somehow that was what panicked the hybrid the most.

"I swear, this isn't what it looks like!" he hurried to explain. "He's just old and senile, and too much excitement muddles his brain and—"

Sapnap interrupted him, answering Karl's question with a sharp, emotionless voice. "Living my best life without Kinoko," he muttered, his expression darkening, "or are you going to exile me from *here* too?"

Ranboo watched as Karl flinched from the verbal blow. He wanted to tell Sapnap to stop, and yet... Well, wasn't some sort of revenge on Kinoko what he had come to the Commune for?

"Well?" the fireborn probed, one eyebrow raised.

His arms were still crossed, and he hadn't changed his stance. Ranboo had to admit that his position made him look intimidating, and yet he wondered if he wasn't instead just frozen to the spot.

Karl sighed. "You know full well I don't have the power to do that."

"So you *would* do it?"

"Of course not, Sapnap!" the other rushed to assure him. His voice dropped a little, going from strained and surprised to quiet and shy. "I... I missed you."

"Well, who's fault is that, I wonder?"

"Please, Sapnap." Karl sounded desperate now. "I never wanted to hurt you, I—"

"—was only thinking of Kinoko, I know," Sapnap muttered, cutting him off. "So was I, Karl. *So was I*, and yet I'm the one who paid for it. I didn't do anything, Karl. Why didn't you believe me?"

"You burned it all down anyway!"

"Because it's the only way I can get people like you to listen to me!" he flared, roughly pushing himself away from the wall.

Sapnap spun around and faced Karl properly for the first time in all his richly adorned glory. He put on his crescent-moon mask, shadowing half of his face and letting the other turn red with rage. Even the bloodstain on the front of his loose shirt appeared to glow brighter. Ranboo followed his lead, and put his own mask back on, then shuffling along to stand next to Sapnap. It was partially as a silent show of solidarity, and partially to jump in and pull him back if things started to get violent.

"I've always been reduced to my fire, haven't I?" Sapnap snarled. "The blood I split, my body counts, huh? That's all anyone sees! No one pays attention to the guy who needs just a little bit of help, who tries to defend himself like a normal person! No one, except for Technoblade."

"*Technoblade?!*" George squeaked suddenly. His face was taught and frightened. He was staring at the fireborn as if he was staring at a stranger. At a monster. "Sapnap, what—"

"Yeah, and if you're not careful, we'll come for you all again. Kinoko could burn twice if I wanted it to."

It was an empty threat, and Ranboo knew that. Sapnap was homesick, and the Syndicate had realized that pretty quickly. He may have been angry and ready to take it down on that first meeting, but the idea was quickly left to fade away. Sapnap wouldn't hurt Kinoko Kingdom ever again.

Karl on the other hand most likely didn't know that, and that was undoubtedly what had drawn the sudden and startled reaction from him. His eyes were wide, and he began to tremble. He reeled back, and stumbled over a stray tendril, only just catching himself once George ran to his aid.

Ranboo's fierce show of following his friend dropped slightly, and he began to worry for the other party. "Karl," he gulped, "is everything alright?"

He held out his hand in a friendly, reassuring gesture. The stained cuffs of his sleeves had unrolled at some point during that night, but he hoped that Karl would take no notice.

"Stay away from me, both of you!"

Ranboo jumped back when Kinoko's leader screamed in his face. In a matter of moments, Karl became completely disheveled: his brown hair was a mess, his mask hung loosely around his neck, and his evening-wear was crumpled and creased. He slid to the

floor without taking his silver eyes off the two figures in front of him. He looked terrified, ridiculously so even.

It was like he had just seen a ghost.

Karl sank down further. "No, no..." He held his head, rambling to himself. "I can't go through all of this again... I can't, I... George!"

"I'm here," the man in question replied, casting everyone present. It was clear that he was just as puzzled and disoriented as everyone else. "I'm here, Karl. It's alright—"

"Are the others here?!" In a sudden change of tune, Karl stood up straight again and began to cast frantic looks across the blood-coloured landscape. "What year are we in?!"

Ranboo never thought he'd see someone be more anxious and erratic than himself. Clearly, he was wrong, or he had forgotten yet again.

Even Sapnap's face fell, and he reached out for the panicking leader, "Karl—"

"Stay away!"

This time, the reaction was vicious, and if George wasn't trying to guide Karl away, Ranboo was pretty sure he would have clawed Sapnap's eyes out. The fireborn's, and the hybrid's too, most likely. They were in the same basket, and if they weren't careful, their heads would roll together.

Karl broke free, and Ranboo cowered away, fearing the worst. Instead, however, the leader gave them one last look, and rushed off, shoving himself through the crowd. George stood stock still for a moment longer, blinking at the fine coat in his hands that he had been holding Karl by, then snapped back to reality.

"I'll make sure he's alright," he gulped. His eyes landed on Sapnap and suddenly, Ranboo saw only a deep, joyous warmth in them, and he looked infinitely relieved. "I'm glad you're safe."

The hybrid was even more surprised when his fireborn companion smiled back. "It's good to see you again, George."

George hesitated for a moment more, clearly unsure of what to do. It was clear that his arms and feet itched to run into Sapnap's arms and embrace him, but the item of clothing he still held seemed to remind him. He gave Sapnap and Ranboo a quick, friendly nod each – along with one last questioning, concerned glance to the pile of

feathers they strategically hid from view – and rushed off after the frantic leader like a well-mannered servant.

Ranboo allowed himself to breathe freely again. "Sapnap?"

No reply.

The hybrid swallowed down his worst fears. "Sapnap?" he called again.

"I've lost him, haven't I?"

Ranboo hadn't really known what heartbreak was until he saw it with his own two eyes. In Sapnap's tone, he could hear all the love, all the pain, all the turmoil and the grief.

The hybrid wanted to give him some words of comfort – any kind comments he could find and reassure his friend with. The rivers of his brain ran dry. All he could do was stand as close as he could without touching him, just to let him know that he was there. That he was his friend, that Sapnap wasn't alone.

Ranboo couldn't claim to understand Sapnap's pain: the closest he could compare it to was losing Tommy, and quite nearly losing Tubbo too. He didn't know what he'd do without them, even if Tommy still probably hated him for more than one reason. Still, nothing could ever compare to what losing your fiancée was like.

"Well."

Ranboo and Sapnap turned as one, and spied someone standing not too far away, undoubtedly eavesdropping on the scene. Ranboo reeled back, startled by the familiar figure. He hadn't seen that face, with its crooked grin and jagged pickaxe scar, since... He couldn't recall!

Quackity brushed a few orange pores off his dark blue, silk suit, then narrowed his eyes at the small trio huddled against the walls.

"Nice job, Sapnap," he commented.

Ranboo could see the corner of his mouth twitch, so close to curving it into a smirk. Once full of wry comments and a loud, chiming laugh, now the way his whole face twisted was simply cruel, and chilling.

"Fuck off," Sapnap snapped at the newcomer, spitting a few embers at his feet. "You've done it once, and you can do it again."

Big Q stood silently for a moment or two more, head tilted to the side.

"I'd love to," he mused, "but I have a few business deals to close in and around this place. Diplomacy business. Just Las Nevadas things that don't concern you. I'll 'fuck off' when I choose to, thank you very much."

He thumbed open the cap of a flask, and took a swig. His eyes never left the fireborn or the hybrid's figures and when he had drunk his fill, he noisily smacked his lips and deliberately wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"It was nice to see you again," he said, impassive. "Good luck with the social exile and all that, both of you."

Ranboo bristled, gulping as he was no longer ignored. Faint recollections of the failed "Butcher Army" offensive came back to him, and he choked down the shame, the failure.

"Leave the kid alone," Sapnap growled, curling his lip.

Big Q gave them both a deep, mocking bow. "Good luck with him, Sap. He's not too useful when you don't tell him what to do."

With that, Quackity left them too, walking off with a light, snobby strut and a head held high. The flask in his hand was soon replaced by a small coin, and he began to flick it up and down as he strode away.

"Don't listen to him, Ranboo."

Sapnap's voice hovered beside his ear. The hybrid hadn't realized he had retreated into himself, slouching. He tried to fix his posture, but the weight of Quackity's words pushed him down again.

He sighed. "He's right though, Sapnap," he whispered.

Suddenly, his face was caught in-between two warm gloves and the fireborn all but snapped his head to his own.

"Listen to me," he said sternly, their foreheads almost touching. "Quackity's a dick, and you're a thousand times better in every way. Just look at what we're doing now. We're fucking awesome."

"Sapnap, we knocked out an old man, chased off your fiancée, and possibly just made an enemy in a casino tycoon."

"Exactly. We're useful as hell, Ender Boy, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. We're our own little team."

Ranboo cracked a smile. The tease was genuine, but it still clearly wasn't enough to hide the apprehension and deep sorrow burning across Sapnap's face. Ranboo debated on hugging him again, but felt that would only make things worse. He was good at doing that, he had to admit.

Thankfully, everything was swiftly forgotten once Philza's unconscious form began to stir from his forced slumber.

"I have to say, I didn't expect you to accept the invitation."

Puffy looked at Bad with a blank stare. The invitation? *Her* invitation? She had been... invited? On purpose?

She decided to be honest. "I didn't get one. I came with some friends."

He gave her a curious look. "Oh? Who with? Technoblade?"

"How did—"

"I saw you arrive with him and his clan." The demon laughed. "I didn't take you for an anarchist."

"I'm not, but Techno's lovely once you get to know him."

"Even after he murdered your son? You're very forgiving."

Puffy almost tripped over her own hooves, the comment taking her off guard. Bad caught her, his eyes gazing at her with a concerned gaze. However, the captain knew what genuine worry looked like: the demon was clearly just trying to stifle a smirk.

She hadn't... Tubbo... She...

She had tried to push that thought away for so long. Tubbo had never really talked about his execution to her, the only details she got were that his burns were due to fireworks and that Technoblade was peer pressured into shooting him, and that above all, he had forgiven him for it. Respecting her son's wishes, she tried to pardon Techno too. It was hard, especially when Doomsday came and went, but after he saved Sam...

Like Tubbo, she could no longer hold anything against the piglin. A small grudge would linger, yes, but she would know how to keep it hidden and tame.

She formulated her answer carefully. "What's in the past is in the past," she said, "and there's no point lingering on what could have been."

"Is that why you're scared of me? Do you no longer see us as friends?"

"No, Bad," she said, "it's because you tried to kill me."

There was a pause as Bad looked over at her. She couldn't decipher his gaze, and stopped in her tracks.

"Ah, yes, apologies for that," he finally said, one of his pointed ears twitching. He started walking again.

Apologies for that.

"You can't just *apologize* like that!" Puffy exploded, rushing to keep up with him, holding up the hem of her dress as she did. The tendrils made her path just that little bit harder to follow, and she somewhat envied the way Bad was stepping over them with such ease.

Again, Bad was taller than her, but unlike others, he didn't exactly slow down to help her keep up with him.

He turned to face her. "You're still alive, aren't you?"

"You killed a *child*, Bad! Purpled died because of you!"

And me, she added silently, guilt returning once again.

To her surprise, Bad seemed taken aback. It was almost as if he didn't understand what she was saying, and he even took off his mask to stare at her fully. Did he not know about Purpled? What had he been told? What *hadn't* he been told? He looked well and truly shaken.

"Punz never... I never thought..." The demon raised his head, peering through the crowds in search of something, or someone. "Oh muffin..."

Puffy, against her better judgment, went to reach out to him. She was about to gently hold and stroke his arm, just as she used to during the gloomy days of old when he'd be

in a particularly pouty mood. She would have, if her grudges hadn't pulled her back to her senses. Her fingers curled around nothing but air, and she pulled back.

"You killed a child, Bad," she reminded him.

She expected another sudden outburst of shock and desolation, but instead, Bad put his mask back on and gave her a sideways glance. "Who hasn't, around these parts?" he replied coldly. "Sam did too, and you still trusted him."

That was no comparison. There *was no* comparison.

Puffy put her foot down. "He wasn't the one who killed Tommy, Dream—" She stopped, her fury finally at boiling point. "You left Sam to die! How could I forgive you for that?"

"You weren't there, Puffy. You had no idea what went on inside that prison. All you have are rumours. There was nothing anyone could have done for him."

"But—"

"*He's dead, Puffy.*"

Captain Puffy bit her tongue to stop herself from blowing her top again, and revealing the truth. Revealing what she knew, what she had seen, what she had cried and fretted over for two whole months, and what was happening right now. She was so close to telling him about the 'ghost' haunting the Eggpire's own celebration right now. All she could do was look away and say nothing.

Bad must have interpreted her silence as something else, as she felt his clawed hand on her bare shoulder a moment later. It was soft and comforting, but she didn't want it to be. She didn't want to forgive her old friend so easily.

"I'm sorry," he said, his tone softer than she had ever heard it. It was coming from a gentle soul she never thought she'd talk to again, not after the Egg took control of every word that came out of his mouth.

"Sorry will never cut it," she muttered, still refusing to look at him.

"He was dear to me too, and I wish I could have rescued him. I'm truly sorry."

That rang true, strangely enough. Puffy had a feeling that Bad was telling the truth. Why, how? No clue. It was just genuine. In a brief moment of tenderness – part of her still

missing their old friendship – she let her guard down, leaning a little into his touch. She still didn't say anything, and simply sighed.

"Puffy, I didn't invite you to walk with me to fight and argue. I want to turn over a new leaf. I want us to be friends again."

"Fine." Puffy would give him a chance, if that's what he wanted from her. She faced him.

"For Sam," he said.

She was still *so close* to stabbing him – "for Sam", incidentally.

"Alright." The captain took a deep breath. "We turn over a new leaf."

A large smile lit up Bad's face, and he beckoned the nearest waiter over. He took the two, tall wine glasses balanced on the tray and offered one to her. Puffy took one look at the dark crimson contents sloshing around inside, and declined.

To her surprise, Bad didn't push, and set the second glass back down. "You need to have a sip though, at least," he smiled, offering her a taste of his own drink. "It's divine, really."

Puffy took the glass from in-between his sharp, dark fingers, and hesitated again. She looked from the wine to Bad. "Are you trying to poison me?" she asked with a small laugh, part of her still suspicious of him.

The demon laughed heartily. "Of course not, you muffinhead," he cackled, as if she had just told him the funniest joke in the world. "I wouldn't be drinking any of it if I was."

To prove his point, he took the glass back and downed most of it a single, well-mannered gulp, then handed it back and licked his lips. Puffy had to admit that his confidence began to grow on her, and she gazed down at the dregs of the wine.

"So, now we both die if it's poisoned," she teased.

"Basically."

"Smart demon." She smirked.

He was still staring at her intently, his pale eyes locked into hers. At first, he had seemed fascinated by the fact that she was talking to him – one could even say nostalgic for

their past friendship. Now, however, his gaze was much more insistent than anything else. He must have taken her adamant refusal to drink as an insult.

Puffy knew that she shouldn't have been forced into doing anything, but a pang of guilt still decided to gnaw at the edges of her mind. Anyway, she had somewhat patched up her relationship with Bad, and wanted to stay on good terms for a while, at least. Anything she could do to appease the Eggpire – and make her uninfected friends' job that night easier – she was going to do.

She smiled, and held up the glass. "Cheers, then."

She took a sip.

The few remaining drops of wine swirled around her mouth, washed over her tongue and slipped down her throat, and she thought nothing of it – until the searing heat engulfed her neck. At first, it was only a faint, kitten-like scratch at the back of her throat. Then, as time went on, it crept up higher and higher. Fire began to burn her palate, and she gasped loudly, her tongue ablaze.

Poison! That was her first thought. Bad *did* poison her!

She leaned against the nearest tendril, which happened to be one that had conveniently sprouted beside her in the space of a minute or two. Her hand gripped its hard, slimy surface, desperate for a crutch of any sort.

Poison. There was no other explanation. A toxic hemlock slip, a dash of arsenic, or something else entirely that she had never heard of before.

The glass escaped her hands and crashed to the floor, shattering into sharp shards of crystal shine.

So this was how she was going to go for the last time: poisoned by her old friend in the middle of a masquerade, with so many things left unsaid and unfinished. So this was how it ended, once and for all—

"Puffy, relax."

Bad's voice was calm and even, too indifferent to her state. His arm gripped her shoulder, and she dared look up at him with hazy eyes. Her mouth parted, her face slack and unable to properly convey her panic and her fury.

"What did...?" She trailed off. "What was in...?"

Her eyes fell to the floor again. The remains of the shattered glass had disappeared, most likely cleaned up by one of the discreet, serviceable waiters ghosting their way in and out of the crowd.

"You mean the drink?" The demon followed up with a laugh. "I'm sorry, I should have warned you. It's quite strong."

Well, *that* was an understatement. The inside of her mouth still flamed up like a bonfire every time she dared suck in a breath. The air she inhaled didn't seem to help, thick with a frivolous musk only balls and rowdy parties bore. She didn't know which one was worse, her senses strangely heightened.

Every footstep was too loud; every laugh shook her; every bit of chatter rang in her ears and blurred together in an unbearable mess; and every creak of the ever-growing tendrils raked across her eardrums.

Every word and breath that spewed out of her didn't sound like her, at least to her own ears. Every syllable was tarnished by a choir of hissing and cackling. Hisses and cackles she knew all too well, the ones that turned her mind as red as the world around her.

She knew what drunkenness felt like, and this was certainly not it. Finally, after months of being clean, the Egg had found a way back into her mind.

How exactly, she didn't know. She couldn't remember – the broken glass and the spiked wine had been swiftly forgotten, buried and concealed underneath the new veil of red that had taken control.

"Can you stand?"

She tried. Her entire body felt woozy, as if none of her movements were her own. The strings linking her limbs to her will had been switched, now held and controlled by something else entirely, a mind that was not her own.

She tried, and she found that she could. As soon as her hand left the tendril, it dove back into the ground, out of sight and out of mind. She focused on Bad again, and forced out a smile.

"Yeah," she pushed out, trying to rack her brain and recall the last couple of minutes. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Her hooves hit the floor as she sauntered her way over to Bad. While they were normally hard and sturdy, now they felt soft and jelly-like underfoot. Before she knew it, her demon friend had leaned her on him, keeping her upright.

"That's good." He pet her arm. "That's good..."

The grand piano began to hum again, filling the silence with a deep, rich suite of low notes. Guests began to move to the floor again, this time with decidedly less lighthearted laughs and witty jokes. Instead, they stared deep into each others' eyes, their holds rigid and serious. Heels hit the wooden floor with sharp kicks, and the violin took that as a cue to pick up with a screech.

It was definitely darker than anything else Puffy had heard that night, and it sent a warm, snaking chill up her spine.

Beside her, Bad tapped her arm. "Have you ever danced the tango?" he asked her.

"I can't say I have, no," she replied, mesmerized.

"Neither have I."

He grinned at her, wry and humbling. She couldn't help but smile back, and burst out laughing.

"So what?" she giggled, still lightheaded. "You're suggesting that we should just step out there and dance with them?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Bad pointed to a faraway point in the middle of the dancers. "Right there, in the middle of the floor. We'll put on one muffin of a show."

There was something silly and downright ridiculous about his offer, and she almost expected him to retract it and admit to a joke. He didn't, and there was something about the way he subtly urged her toward the floor that made her think he was quite serious. Even the hissing Egg spitting and laughing in her head seemed in favour of it all.

"Are you sure you want us to be the talk of the realm for the next few centuries?" Puffy asked, resisting less and less.

"Oh, don't worry, I don't think anyone tonight would dare do anything to hurt the hosts," her friend assured her with a smug smile, pulling her along effortlessly like a barnyard animal on a lead. "Anyway, am I not allowed to share a dance with a newly reconciled friend?"

"Be careful, buddy," Puffy laughed, holding onto him as her hooves still threatened to buckle underneath her one way or another, "the Egg might get jealous, and we both know how dangerous that could be."

As they stepped into the golden light, Bad turned to look at her. His face was softer than she had ever seen before, shadowed by a light, crimson and yellow hue.

"There's the Captain Puffy I knew," he chuckled. "Sweet muffin, we missed you!"

Chapter Sixty: Feelings I Can't Fight

"Laugh at me all you want, Sam, but that was some of the best armour I've ever worn."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. But weren't they kind of uncomfortable?"

"Well," Technoblade began after a brief moment of reflection, "piglin legs are strangely shaped on the foot side of things. I guess that's why they rubbed my heel, but still. Trust me; when you're a warrior of my size, exposed legs are the hardest part to try and protect." He looked over at Sam, taking him in from his head to his toes. "Maybe we should think about getting *you* some, big guy."

Sam scoffed, "I'm alright, thanks."

As much as armour and the protection it brought was a must for him, something about having long, thigh-high boots – reinforced and enchanted or not – didn't entirely appeal to him, even when Technoblade suggested they could be matching.

"I'm good, honestly," Sam chuckled, then brushed a hand over his stomach. "However, if you do know where to get something for this part, I'd be grateful."

"It already exists, and it's called a chest plate. Also, it's meant to be worn, not thrown aside when you feel too hot, otherwise—"

"—you'll end up getting impaled by a defenseless convict, yeah, I know."

Even months after the fact, when Sam was well and truly healed, Techno still insisted on reprimanding him for his lack of logic and protection. His tone was always stern, but

Sam knew it was simply out of concern and a half teasing, half genuine sibling-like worry.

"I'm serious, Sam."

"I know you are, and I'll be more careful in the future, I promise." It was the same answer he gave every time, and it was the one that satisfied Technoblade.

"Good," Techno agreed, nodding sharply.

They moved on, sticking to the cavernous walls of the masquerade. Their side of the room was decidedly darker than the opposite one, shrouding it in the aura of a different world entirely. A few of the flaming lanterns had died out and withered into small, barely visible sparks that only cast a dim light over the floor underneath. Strange, unidentified smells and wafts of tobacco smoke curled over the floor and across the way, the scents thicker and stronger than anywhere else at the party – Sam even had an inkling that not all the unknown beverages here were those of the Eggpire. He could just pick out the sharp tang of absinthe, among others. The dark haven was also surprisingly popular: first time lovers in tight embraces and shady individuals in deep conversation lurked around every tendril in shadowed clusters.

Other, non-occupied persons also lingered along the sides, more eccentric and underdressed than the more glitzy guests on the dancefloor and opposite side of the masquerade. A few of them stared at the other side of the room, wistfully, some might say, and unconsciously tug at the hems of their own clothes. Others simply paid no heed and got on with their own affairs, their status as social outcasts duly accepted. The few, posher and innocent passers-by that did walk down the middle turned a blind eye to the world around them, paying no heed to the nighttime pleasures and secrets of the underworld they traversed.

The right side of the cavern was the perfect place to hide out and sneak around unnoticed, among the populace and the tattered bohemian guests – that's apparently why Techno had dragged Sam along with him to take care of it.

What that fortunately meant was that very few spared so much as a glance towards Technoblade, Sam and the trails of brown sand they let fall in their wake. Their job was certainly the easiest, secrecy-wise.

That also allowed them both to speak more freely with each other, which is how Techno got onto the ramble about his warring past, his armour, his favourite weapons and methods...

Sam couldn't help but suppress chills when the piglin told him the tales of his adventures, packed with graphic description and enveloped in a shroud of dark glory. The Blade was clearly proud of his work, no matter how many less-than approving frowns Sam would give him – he couldn't exactly pretend to enjoy the tragic, bloody tales of slaughtered orphans and torn-down realms. L'Manberg, he didn't exactly blame him too much for because he had a legitimate reason for it, but his other tales and carnages seemed like they were just... for fun, almost. He much rather preferred the few stories of the Antarctic Empire that Techno and Philza used to govern, but then again, it seemed that the reformed-anarchist was somewhat hesitant to speak of it. So Sam didn't push, and listened to what he got, even if that did mean getting exposed to a not too flattering picture of his friend.

He respected Techno, and he loved him for what he *could* be. There were a few, bloodied imperfections here and there, but he knew that the piglin had a good heart. He *couldn't* be all bad, and he wasn't. He was just... flawed, some might say heavily so. Then again, weren't they all? Wasn't everyone, in one way or another?

"You've had quite the eventful lives," Sam pointed out at one point.

Technoblade cast him a look from under his black and gold mask, snout curving into a wide grin. Piglins were notoriously prideful creatures, and it seems that the warrior cursed with their physiology was just the same. "Well, so have you, right?"

Sam blinked at the question, taken aback. He thought for a moment, digging through his past.

He was born and raised by the aristocracy; he ran away at eighteen; he came across the first settlers of the Greater SMP; he went away to study redstone engineering; he came back to the SMP and got thrown into a new ruling position within his beloved Badlands; he built the world's most indestructible prison; he fought against a crimson infection; he died; he was saved; and he was now marching head on into dangerous territory with new allies planning to essentially put in motion a large-scale, terrorist plot.

"Eh, it was slightly exciting at best," he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

He couldn't say that nothing happened in his life, that was for sure, but Sam suddenly found himself seething with greed: he wanted more. He wanted to travel again, to embark on new adventures. He would have, if his guilt and inability to let go of what he loved weren't so blatantly shackling him down. He had the Badlands, he had his friends, he had morals and missions. He had people counting on him. No, with all the turmoil – some of which was his own fault – he couldn't leave. Not yet, at least.

Technoblade was not convinced by his explanation, as heard by the exasperated grunt he huffed out near his ear. But thankfully, his attention was quickly diverted by something up ahead. "Well, well, look who else the Egg dragged to its lair..."

Sam followed his gaze. It landed on a couple of hunched up figures loitering against one of the cavern walls. The first one was the figure of a man, cloaked by a thick black coat that almost hid him entirely from the world. In front of him stood a short but lean character who placed a hand on the other's shoulder and was leaning in close. His rich, dark blue overcoat was slightly bigger than him, with his sleeves rolled up and the shoulders hanging limply from his frame. A toothy, crooked smile was turned towards the other man, and he was pressing something round and gold into his palm.

Sam frowned. He would recognize those fake manners and pearly teeth anywhere. He also knew that a casino freak like him would certainly not be handing out normal alms to the poor or suffering: he was one to offer something a lot more sinister, a ticket to another, dark underworld, this time hidden under the Strip of Las Nevadas.

Sam had unfortunately fallen for that con, and he knew he wasn't the first... or the last. Quackity had a knack for scooping out poor, miserable souls for his death roulette.

It sickened him, and he narrowed his eyes. "He's—"

"—pathetic." Techno finished his sentence, and they both stifled a laugh. "I'm not a fan of him either."

Quackity lingered for a few moments longer – allowing a sinister "No, thank *you* for trusting me" to reach their ears – then he walked away, most likely to stalk his next bit of desperate prey. He was a businessman, a bureaucrat, and a lone wolf. He was dangerous, and he liked to work alone. That was perhaps one of the biggest faults in him Sam had seen.

"I wonder *why* you don't like him," Sam sighed to Techno, sarcastic. "He even went out of his way to make a restaurant for you in Las Nevadas."

"I've heard. He could have at least chosen a more flattering picture of me for the damn sign, though."

"The dead look doesn't exactly suit you," Sam agreed, and they moved on themselves.

Las Nevadas was behind him now, and although he would still be infinitely grateful to Quackity for some of the perks he had received with their business partnership, Sam had

closed that book long ago. He didn't even know how Quackity reacted to his "death". Maybe he didn't even know about it. In any case, he didn't care anymore. Sam didn't need him, or the capitalist high-life the casino offered.

He smirked to himself, noting that the rich and powerful "high-lives" he was dragged into never truly suited him in any way. He was much happier sharing warm, quaint little dinners in snowy cabins and taking walks filled with simple conversation, or sometimes with nothing but a fresh breeze blowing through his hair. That didn't mean that he wasn't going to use his past experience to joke around with his piglin friend a little.

"Head up, back straight and look lively," Sam teased, jabbing Technoblade's side. "This is a high-society ball, not a village fair."

Techno let out an amused grunt, but followed his directions and corrected his posture. "Who do you think you are, my mom?"

"I was quoting my father actually, but close enough."

He couldn't hide the slight resentment that tainted the very mention of his family.

"You must be in your element then," the piglin said back.

"I'll be happy when the entire place burns down, believe me."

"Certified party crasher, I see?"

"When they bring back awful memories, absolutely."

Sam shuddered, attempting to brush off some of the Egg's spores and disruptive thoughts that stuck to his back like sticky tree sap.

Next to him, Techno ripped open another bag of soul sand. "Huh, a ball *and* the Egg. I guess you hit the jackpot."

He began to empty out the contents of the bundle, sticking close to the wall and letting the shimmering grains coat the tendrils coiling along it. Sam followed his lead, and sighed.

"At least I'm here with you," he told the other. "I can tolerate these sorts of things when I'm with friends."

"Oh good," Techno chuckled, "so now *we*'ve got to tolerate *you* tolerating the masquerade. Thanks a lot, Sam. You should have at least said so beforehand and we could have left you at home to horse-sit Carl. Think a little next time."

Sam rolled his eyes, playfully shoving Techno off his feet and into the wall. "Ha, ha. Very funny."

The piglin regained his footing a mere moment later, a wide smile stretching across his snout. "I hope you don't despise it too much to deny me a dance later on," he said, giving him a bow.

Sam pretended to act appalled. "I wouldn't dare!" he gasped, laughing loudly when Technoblade gave him his own equivalent of a "playful" nudge that almost sent him sprawling across the floor.

In all honesty, it wasn't the amusements that put him off these sorts of festivities, simply the obligations they brought. The etiquette, the manners, even every breath had to be perfect and the slightest slip up could bring about disastrous consequences. But dancing was fun, he had to admit, when his partner wasn't a stuck up, rigid old thing that is – the piglin was far from the perfect fit to that description. The prospect of a dance with Technoblade became more appealing, and he smiled.

"As I said," he repeated, "I can tolerate these sorts of things when I'm with friends. A dance sounds like fun."

"Fun, or a bad decision?" Techno grinned back. "I have two left feet and a whole lot of weight. Your toes will *not* survive, Sam, that I can guarantee."

"Oh well, I've had worse, you know." Sam turned his head towards the dance floor bathed in the bright light of the golden chandelier. "The floor's big enough. If you stand at one end and I stand at the other, I'm sure that your left feet won't be a problem."

With Techno's deep chuckles ringing in his ears, Sam moved closer to the light, leaning against a pillar, and took a moment to admire the cavern. Balls were not his thing, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate the effort that went into their execution. Having an eye for detail and architecture, he couldn't help but marvel at the tendril constructions going on, from the ornate little banisters covered in thorns to the gargantuan pillars holding up the roof. It was wrong – morally and naturally, all of it was wrong – and the Egg would never cease to make him shudder with its hisses and mere presence, but he could still compliment the more tame ornaments it had created.

He turned his eyes back to the floor, blinking against the glare of a thousand pieces of jewelry and shimmering masks. The bright silks and velvet that coated the guests glittered, bringing out their sparkles and shine tenfold. Creatures and people of all colours and all species drifted together in perfect harmony, but in the middle of it all, one radiant guest stood out among the others.

Gingerly, Sam stepped closer to the edge of the dancefloor. The tendrils by his feet were thick and pulsing, almost as if they were deliberately trying to block him from going any further. He caught himself on a nearby pillar.

Puffy was... radiant, to say the least, even more so once she seemed to be having fun. She was practically glowing, blue eyes bright and big and visible, even from behind a mask, even from a distance.

"What's up?"

"Nothing, why?"

"You're smiling."

"Am I?"

He definitely hadn't noticed. He wasn't aware of himself, or anything he was doing. That was a first.

There was a loud, chiming laugh, like a ship's bell. Once more, Sam was focused on the floor, and on Puffy. She had thrown her head back, curls falling over her shoulders and down her back. Sam had known her long enough to know she was happy, and relaxed.

Everything only came crashing down when he saw she had a dancing partner, and who in particular it was.

"Sam?" Techno's call of concern fell on deaf ears.

Skin as black as midnight, with horns and claws as sharp as jagged mountain peaks set their owner apart from the crowd. Him and Puffy weren't matching the steps and technique of the others, instead caught up in their own subdued version of the song, smiling and giggling throughout when one of the two accidentally tripped up. Still, there was a rhythm and a rhyme to it all, and a strange beauty in the way they moved.

Sam's stomach twisted. An icy stab pierced his chest. Just like the trident's prongs wedged in his stomach, he didn't realize it was there until the feeling began to trickle

throughout his whole body, bleeding through his entire being. This was not so different, whatever "this" was. Whatever "it" was, it was gnarled and cold, and had changed his entire, humble tune that evening.

"Sam, no!"

He was caught by the arm and yanked back before he even managed to set a foot out from behind the vines. Finally, he drew his eyes away and glared at his captor, rage blazing within them.

"Let me go," he ordered, trying to shake Techno off.

The piglin only gripped him tighter, looming over Sam with the head or two advantage he had. "You can't draw attention to yourself," he grunted as he pulled him back into the shadows.

Sam dug his heels into the layers of tendrils lining the floor, standing his ground. "Technoblade, let me go right now," he ordered. "I can't leave her with Bad! He's dangerous! They're all dangerous, and you're just going to—"

What was Puffy even doing with Bad in the first place? Where was Niki? Was Puffy being held hostage? Did the demon somehow not recognize her beautiful blue eyes behind her mask? Or was something else afoot? Whatever the reason, Sam didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

"She's strong enough to defend herself and if anything were to happen, we'd all be there in a flash," said Techno.

"And what if a flash is too long? What if something happens and we can't get to her? What if—"

The frustration built up and up inside him, until a familiar blockage strangled his throat and constricted his chest. Leaning against the nearest tendril, he clapped a hand to his heart and gripped it through his clothes, hissing as his lungs began to suffocate him with clouds of gunpowder. He growled and gasped as an explosion that would never come continued to torment his insides. He leaned against the nearest sturdy tendril, ignoring as it vibrated under his touch.

And yet, through all this, Technoblade hadn't moved to help him, instead watching him with narrowed eyes and a head held high. Sam locked eyes with him, gritting his teeth

against the pain. He must have looked absolutely crazy to the piglin, but it still drew no reaction.

Eventually, Techno spoke. "Sam, you of all people know how capable the captain is. This isn't a question of her safety, is it?"

Sam stayed silent, his gaze defiant. If the piglin didn't understand the seriousness of it all, then he'd *show* him how determined he really was. His grip on his breast tightened, his nails digging into himself and drawing a hiss of pain and frustration.

Techno's eyes lit up with understanding. "Oh, I see."

"See what?"

"You love her."

Something shattered.

Sam was quiet for a long while. His head was ringing, his throat was burning, his chest was heaving—it all hurt. Everything except for his heart.

"Sam?"

"She's my friend," he pushed out, "of course I do."

"You've used that excuse too long – I've seen you around her. You're in love, Sam. I can see it clear as day. Pity that it was jealousy that finally brought you to your senses."

Now, his tone had turned much gentler, sympathetic, even. The piglin tilted his head to the side, still watching the man fight against his stupid, cursed creeper side, and yet still not offering to soothe him in any way, shape or form.

"The Egg is messing with you, Technoblade," Sam pushed out with a growl. His throat seemed to crackle with every syllable, like an air full of gasoline just waiting for a match to set it alight. "Don't listen to it!"

"I've been bearing the weight of voices in my head since I was a child," Techno replied, with a revelation that caught Sam completely off guard. "The Egg has nothing on me, and it never will. I am completely awake and aware, more than you in any way. I know what I see, and I see you falling for the captain."

"I'm *worried* for her, there's a difference." Sam pointed at the ballroom floor. "That demon may seem sweet, but he's dangerous now the Egg is fully in his head!"

He made a move to stride off again, chest still heavy and hurting. Another, hard yank pulled him back.

"Things will get worse for all of us if you get spotted by the Eggpire too soon," Technoblade grunted, dragging him backwards, "trust me."

Sam remained quiet, and twisted himself out of his grasp, only to be caught in the piglin's other hand.

"Have you ever read stories or heard the legends about this sort of thing? About heroes and idiots killing themselves or others for love?" Techno continued. "You're fighting a losing battle."

"Against you or against myself?" Sam spat back.

"And why not both?"

Sam's next escape was blocked by a hand on his shoulder; the one after by Techno blocking his path with his large, bulking figure; a cycle began to repeat itself. They were almost caught up in a sort of strange tango of their own, with all the pure brute force and harshness the dance itself only tried to replicate. Sam's arms and shoulders were purple and blue after Techno repeatedly and violently clamped his hand around them, but his determination to get past only grew. The screeching on the far off violin stung his ears and sharp, blackened fingernails raked into his skin. And yet, nothing made him more angry that the supposed words of wisdom Techno was shoving between his titanium grips. They were stronger and more painful than the shackles and walls of Pandora's Vault.

"There's nothing wrong with being in love, but passion also means suffering, and I hope you know that—"

Another set of nails dug into his wrist, painning him even through his glove.

"Suspicion, envy, anger, betrayal can follow soon after, and the pain of the loss will be unbelievable—"

He almost crashed into Techno again, eyes blazing.

"Love can turn to hate so easily, and we all know hate will end in tragedy—"

No, not a tragedy. Sam wouldn't let that happen.

"It can be beautiful, but not if your first move is founded on your ego—"

He lunged again.

"You need to be careful—"

Sam was caught one last time between Techno's fingers, his forearm immobilized. They stared at each other with narrowed eyes, panting.

"—or the jealousy will drive you mad," the piglin finished.

Sam had heard more than enough. With as much strength as he could muster, he gave Techno a good, hard shove, and wrenched himself out of his muscled grasp. He knew everything that the piglin was talking about. He knew what grieving was, he knew about heartbreak and betrayal.

"I'm not jealous," Sam snapped, brushing himself off and regaining his dignity.

"Then what are you? What are you, apart from beyond the borders of friendship?"

"I've told you before, I'm worried about her."

"Oh, this guy's *just* worried about her! That excuse gets weaker every time, Sam. Why are you so insistent on denying all of this? Are you scared?"

"Yes, Techno!" he finally cracked. "Yes, I'm scared!"

His retort was loud, too loud, perhaps, and they received a few odd looks from passers-by. Sam saw Techno quietly edge a little further in front of him, blocking him from everyone's view. Sam lowered his tone and his eyes.

He felt sick. Sick of himself, above all things else.

"Is that what you wanted to hear?" he muttered. "I'm scared, Techno. I'm scared because I've been in love before, and it never ended well."

"I understand."

"No, you *don't*." He glared up at the piglin and at the pitiful gaze that crossed his features and wrinkled his snout. "You've never had to cut off the arm of someone you

used to be head-over-heels for because they went behind your back and betrayed your trust. You've never had to go through something like that."

"You're right, I haven't."

There was no conviction in his tone. Of course the piglin knew about betrayal, what was Sam thinking? In all honesty, he was thinking about one thing only. One person only.

"I don't want to lose her," Sam said, his voice low. As the truth ebbed out, so did the weight in his chest. "All this time, everything I've done, it's because I don't want to lose anyone ever again. I've stayed silent around her and I've stayed away from Michelle just because I've fucked up with everyone else. With Tommy especially, but even Bad and Ant. I couldn't even save them from a dumb egg! Puffy is and always has been an amazing friend, and I... What if I screw up and lose her for good this time? I don't want to take that risk."

"If you don't take it, you'll never know," Techno said, his voice quiet and hushed too, "but there's a time for everything. It's not here and not now. Your priority is to calm down, get your wits together, and *not draw attention to yourself*."

"I can't leave her with Bad, no matter what happens. I *can't* leave her. Everything about him right now, everything he's doing is wrong."

His eyes upon her face. His hand upon her hand. His mind – or rather, the Egg's whispers – even tried to torture him with the prospect of something more. An embrace, or a kiss shared between them. Something that would never happen, not with Bad, but there was no rest for jealous thoughts. They grow more poisonous, and they don't stop. The icy jab in his heart struck yet again, harder than ever before.

"It's more than I can stand..."

"Sam—"

"If you try to stop me again, I'll... I'll"

Technoblade was an absolute beast in both body and skill, and Sam had only successfully beaten him twice in a friendly combat. Even then, looking back, Technoblade probably went easy.

Still.

"I'll kill you," Sam said.

There was no savage hate behind his words, simply frustration.

"Gods above," Technoblade said, shaking his head. "How in the world did I get stuck with trying to protect a man so stubbornly ruled by his heart?"

But he didn't make a move to pull Sam back this time. Testing the waters, Sam took a single step away from him. All Technoblade did was give him a slow, solemn blink in response.

It was a "go". A reluctant one to be sure, but Sam promised himself he'd make it up to Techno later. Right now, he was given the chance to act, and he took it.

Spinning away from Technoblade, he ripped some more holes in the remaining bundles of soul sand concealed under his cape. Then, with no hesitation, he stepped out from the sidelines.

After spending so much time in the shadows, the sudden glare of the magnificent chandelier dusted the borders of his vision with a golden hue, like the mist of a time long gone, or a candlelit dream he'd forget once he'd be shaken awake. He gathered his bearings, lingering on the crimson outskirts. Now, he finally began to heed Techno's warning about being recognized, and hunched over to adjust his mask. He averted his eyes from anyone who so much as glanced his way, and instead took the opportunity to look for a way through the dancers. They bobbed and weaved in front of him, creating a constant, moving wall. He did try to slip through a couple of times, only to be involuntarily pushed back against the pillars. He wouldn't let that stop him. He was too determined, and the way he roughly adjusted his dark gloves only showed it more.

A teasing voice sounding suspiciously like the Egg began to jeer at him, worming inside his mind and biting at every ounce of self-control he still had left.

Look at him, they scoffed with tinny tones and shrill cackles, jealousy has driven him mad!

His lungs were still clogged and heaving, filled with smoke that would never escape, but nothing weighed more than his heart. He was no stranger to it, and yet as he grew up, he wished sorely that he had been. It would have numbed the brutality and rashness of some of his past heartbreaks.

Just as he had told Puffy a once upon a time, he wished he had lost his ability to love.

His first few crushes had been innocent enough: the fairytale characters in the books he loved to read, and the daughter of one of the servants in his family's castle. Nothing but normal, childhood infatuations that he ended up growing out of.

Then, there were the suitors his parents pressured him to woo. Princes, princesses, dukes, duchesses, counts, countesses, anyone with a high enough status that pleased his family. For a while, Sam believed that these liaisons were the best and only options for someone like him, and he forced his heart to love whichever suitor showed a mild interest. But as he would get to know them, they all turned out to be just as dreary as the last, or just as avid and power-drunk. Eventually, he came to realize that there was more to it all than arranged marriages, and he ran.

The next couple he could blame on the loneliness of being confined to the airy, gothic halls of the redstone academies he frequented. Intricate engineering and hours of studying never left much room for warmth of any kind, and so when the opportunities arose, the students took advantage of the spare time they had. The feeling of being alone was less crushing in his first years, where the corridors, workshops and auditoriums were full to the brim with young, starry-eyed students just like him. Then, the years and classes dragged on, and as he moved up the ranks, he moved through the different schools. When he got to his final year – his last course being held in a secluded, cathedral-like establishment far, far away from any civilization, where he was going to become a Grand Master – there were only three other students there. Their secretive and sacred training left no room for pleasures or frivolities of any kind.

Yes, the loneliness had lulled him into a false sense of desperation, craving warmth and companionship. Perhaps that's what pushed his eventual, romantic fondness for Ponk when he returned to the SMP. A perfect, nostalgic bubble where he knew he was loved, only to be burst when the question became too real for him.

"I don't know."

What kind of answer to a confession was that? It was a reply that had rendered them both silent that day in the lemon grove, and the distance between them had grown until Sam's view of Ponk was no longer shadowed by a rosy-pink cloud of perfection. They were still friends, good ones, *great* ones – until they had both stabbed each other in the back not too long ago. Betrayal indeed. So much had gone wrong...

And now, there was something else. *Someone* else. He never thought that the washed-up sea captain he had saved from the brine would stay in one place for as long as she had, let alone become one of his close friends. The closest, in fact, once tensions almost forced them to only count on each other. A sprout was planted. Then from a simple

friend, something began to grow, weaving in and out of mutual goals and trust – although it cracked and chipped here and there, it had stood the test of time and strife. That growth had then sprouted a bud. Only recently had that bud began to bloom.

Those couple of months after Dream's escape, after Sam himself was saved from Pandora's Vault, were some of the best he had ever lived. Technoblade's little arctic home was a paradise compared to some of the places he had been. It was perfect – although, it was only missing a couple of things. A couple of familiar, loving faces. He had begun to pine quietly in his own corner, never saying a word about any of it to anyone, and instead feeling his torn and punctured stomach roll at the thought of the final, shaking touch in his hand that Puffy had left before he was carried away. A tear-soaked, trembling hand was the last thing his mind had clung to, along with the two, bright pools of ocean blue that ended up haunting his dreams. He tried to fight it, at first. He ignored the thoughts when they came to visit him, refusing to cave into supposed feelings that only amplified when the tundra became too quiet, or when lonely nights began to tug at his buried memories and innermost wants.

Absence made his heart grow fonder, and fonder, and fonder, until he was past all hope. Finally, when he got to see her again after so long – got to pick her up, hold her, tell her how much he missed her – the bud had revealed all its bright petals. That was the resignation, the beginning of an acceptance he still hadn't fully come to terms with.

That was not why he was so desperate to get to her then, in the middle of the Red Banquet. This was *not* about him, or so he kept telling himself.

Somewhere behind him, he heard a deep humming. Technoblade clearly hadn't left him completely alone, and part of that infuriated him. No words came out from the piglin, just a melody as deep and dark as the tango played by the band. He was still there, hovering over his shoulder like a shadow.

"Sam," he finally said, "there's still time to go back and call this off."

Maybe Sam would have, if he hadn't just caught a glimpse of two dark, curved horns overgrown with red thorns, and next to them, white and brown curls speckled with rose petals.

Maybe he would have given up if the dancers hadn't coincidentally drifted off to the sides in their pairs, still deeply concentrated on the music and clearing him a path straight to the center of the floor.

Maybe he would have, if the gods – or maybe even the Egg itself – hadn't so blatantly shown that they were in his favour.

Instead, he was going to seize the opportunity presented to him, and he inhaled deeply. The music began to pick up speed and magnify its intensity. A musical chaos broke out, and yet the ballroom's occupants remained calm and composed, still moving as elegantly as they had been before, never breaking their rhythm or synchronicity even as the violinist undoubtedly snapped a string. Every one of his footsteps on the wooden floor was matched by the dancers', considerably louder and sharper than his own as the tango raged on around him.

Bad was one of Sam's closest friends, once upon a time, but now he was glaring at his red-clad body and crimson rimmed eyes, he wanted nothing more than to stab him. Not just for Puffy, but for everyone that demon had wronged, including Sam himself. He wanted to rid the world of one more evil doer, no matter if the demon had been consenting or not.

This was not just about jealousy. In fact, it *wasn't* jealousy. Techno was wrong. Sam knew himself. He knew his thoughts, he knew his feelings, and even as he made his way through the path the dancers had involuntarily made for him, his presence ignored as if he was no more than a wisp of smoke, he tried to persuade himself that none of this was about him.

"We're out of sync with everyone else."

"Yeah, no shit."

"Language!"

"Well, we wouldn't be if you just let me take the lead."

"Oh my goodness, Puffy... You still don't trust me!"

"This dance was your mistake, and I'm the one cleaning it up—"

Captain Puffy suddenly let a shriek escape her as Bad suddenly dipped her down to the floor. He gave her a wry smirk, and pulled her up again, clearly reveling in his successful attempt at shutting her up.

"There," he hummed, sounding satisfied, "silence is nice, isn't it?"

Puffy playfully freed her hand from his and swiped at him. "Try that stunt again, and you're dead," she threatened, with no real bite behind her words.

It may have been a mistake, reputation-wise: they received the occasional, snooty and venomous glances from couples they bumped into, and publicly displaying that they had no knowledge of the tango wasn't the smartest move. And yet, it was their imperfection, originality and bickering that set them apart from the others – and dare the captain say, make everything more fun.

Spending some nostalgic and laugh-filled time with Bad, her old friend, truly put a smile back on her face. His playful teasing, exasperated eye-rolls and the telling-off of her potty-mouth were things that she had sorely missed. In fact, she was tempted to believe that this *was* her old friend, unchanged and gentle.

She would have been completely fooled if the Egg's hisses didn't keep slicing through her happy, carefree thoughts, reminding her that it was there, and that it was just as strong and persuasive as ever. Bad was decidedly not freed from its clutches, and Puffy felt like she was slowly being dragged back in as well. Her weakened legs and mind began to weigh a little more with every passing minute, acting as scarlet and crimson drapes softly layering themselves over her whole body, pinning her down little by little.

"Puffy, there's something I've always meant to ask you," Bad said. They continued to spin and turn with brutal kicks to the floor, as sharp and precise as arrowheads. She still had no idea how she was staying upright with wobbling legs and her strength starting to leave her drop by drop.

"What is it?" Puffy asked, focusing on the demon.

"Why exactly did you turn against us?"

By us, he clearly meant the Eggpire, and the Egg itself.

Well, there were a lot of reasons, to be completely honest. The main ones were when she realized that the Egg was out to get her friends and her family. Not only had it tried to drag Tubbo and Tommy into his clutches, but Sam was trapped over it too. *That* was when she snapped out of it. *That* was when she fought to shut it out, and succeeded. Once she had, there came a period of reflection, where all the true horrors of the Eggpire and their Lord began to seep into her mind.

The Egg was difficult to please. It was temperamental, indecisive, and constantly hissing at the back of its disciples' minds. It consumed everything and anything, from the land it bled across to the deepest pits of one's heart.

Captain Puffy had never objected to any of the Egg's demands, at first. Plant a hundred crimson saplings all over the Greater SMP? She would have gladly doubled that amount. Spread the word of the Egg's magnificence? Her eloquence had been unrivaled, and she was listened to eagerly. Her devotion to the Eggpire's cause had been just as strong as its leaders' and for that she was admired within the crimson circles she used to frequent. Bad had been proud of her. Antfrost had been proud of her. The Egg had been proud of her.

Everyone else, all her other, uninfected friends, were decidedly not. Tubbo and Tommy made comments outright whenever they had crossed paths back in those dark, crimson times, one of the two being so much more vocal and brash than the other, and Sam just gave her vacant side eye glances, staring at her as if he had been staring at a stranger. He still wrote to her, but he had kept his distance until she had come to her senses and they went to confront the Eggpire together.

That day was the day that the captain had realized how alone she was without the Eggpire's support, and when her only trustworthy friend, Sam, was trapped in their clutches and barricaded above the offending mass of crimson.

"This is too much!" she had yelled, all her anger against the Eggpire finally tipping over.
"The only two people I care about are locked up!"

It was a slip of the tongue. First of all, a part of her back then still cared a little for Dream – her little duckling – and had sympathized with his predicament in Pandora's Vault. Then, Tubbo was omitted from the lineup, likely an unconscious strategy to keep him safe. After all, attachments were dangerous things to have: they were so easy to control and blackmail people with. The same went for Tommy, and Ranboo, and anyone else.

But in a way, she had been right. She *only* cared for Sam in the sense that she could be open with her affection for him. Tommy was fiercely independent and proud of that fact; Tubbo was oblivious to their blood bond and might have called her weird or overbearing. Sam on the other hand was just as friendly and loving as she was, and wasn't scared to let it be known. The Egg had taken and corrupted a lot of that, depriving her of her old life for the promise of a new one she had a feeling it would never end up providing.

So yeah, there were a lot of reasons why she left the Egg's circles.

"I just snapped out of it," she finally answered Bad.

The whispers and hisses continued to tease her and prove her wrong. She didn't say anything about them, and held her tongue.

"Ah, well I do have to say, that's a shame," replied the demon. "You were a remarkable asset to us."

She frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"And what if you let it in again? You could be all you once were, and more. You could be a queen, *our queen*. Sam's death has left a vacant spot among us. Something tells me he would have wanted you to take it."

She wasn't dumb. She knew exactly what this 'something' was – it was currently hissing the same words into her own mind.

I can give you power.

I can make you a legend.

I can make you a queen.

The seat is still warm. Take it.

If murder and deception is what it took to rise to power within the Eggpire, she wanted none of it. She had made that vow long ago.

"No," she replied, trying to block out the voices.

All of a sudden, Bad's grip on her tightened, clawed and sharp like an eagle's talons. His eyes bore into hers, two glowing, angry slits on the dark black canvas of his face.

"No?" he repeated, voice low and sharp. They spun to a stop, and a jolt of fear struck clean through Puffy.

And yet, she had enough courage to stick to her guns. "I'm not joining the Eggpire again. I hope you know that."

"What makes you sound so sure?"

All trace of friendliness in the demon was gone, replaced by the same, dangerous attitude that ruled the Eggpire with an iron fist.

The captain felt her heart beat faster, and she tried to free herself from his grasp, to no avail. She was treading on thin ice, *very thin ice*, and with the Egg and its other acolytes swarming the cavern and dancefloor around them, she was on the brink of death, or at the very least painful torture and indoctrination.

She stared Bad down, spitefully holding her tongue and saying nothing.

"You're a sheep, Puffy," the demon growled, leaning close to her. His cheek brushed her ear, rough and leathery, and she flinched. "You always follow the shepherds."

The Egg hummed at the back of her mind, the term 'shepherd' undoubtedly pleasing it to no end.

"Get off me," she spat, tempted to do so in Bad's face. "I don't need any of you."

"Why? Do you think a piglin, a crippled avian and a cowardly matchstick of an enderman are going to keep you safe?"

"No, but they'll crush you and your Egg."

"Sure, we'll see about that."

The demon pulled away from her, his stone cold face melting back into a friendly smile. Now Puffy could see that it was only an act, she felt sick to her stomach.

"Why the long face, muffin?" Bad chuckled, giving her nose a soft boop with his index.

She bleated in fear under her breath and tried to shy away, but he would still not let go of her. His eyes and face had perhaps warmed up a little, but the rest of him clearly had not.

"The Egg's trying to get my brain, if it's any consolation to you," she finally told him, watching his reaction carefully, "but I'm not going to let it win. It's a pointless battle, Bad. I've shut it out once, and I'll do it again."

"*Go pester someone weaker*" was left unspoken. Someone with Bad's corrupted mind would notice the undertone anyway.

She expected him to lash back with another whip of strung up words, laced with venom and trying to stick into her skin. She expected him to act as he always had when the Egg was involved: downright fiery and egotistical, with a prophet-like complex thrown in for good measure.

But all Bad did was give her a sinister grin and a little pat to her arm.

"Give it time, and we'll talk later," he said, and the violin stopped.

The tango and its music came to a close, and the dancefloor began to teem with the knotted mass of masked guests, their orderly pairs and formations broken in favour of more wine or brief conversation. Bad finally released her from his clawed grip, gave her a swift, stiff bow, and moved away. In a matter of moments, she was left alone in the center of the crimson masquerade, her legs wobbling and her head reeling.

"Give it time", the demon had said.

Give what time, the Egg? Is that what he meant? Give it time to get full control of her, most likely. Well, he could wait all he wanted – heck, centuries if he wanted to! She wasn't going to let that happen. She was fine. She was strong. She was—

A raspy gasp suddenly escaped her throat, and she sucked in a heavy, painful breath. It tore down her esophagus and rubbed it raw. Every inhale tasted like blood and she grabbed her throat – any tighter and she'd choke herself. Puffy doubled over, wide-eyed and trying to fight the searing pain. She turned her head.

At the back of the room, the Egg watched on, as immobile as ever, and just as threatening.

I'll have you yet, the droning in her head purred. She tried to block it out. *No one can save you now.*

"May I have this dance?"

Puffy drew her eyes away from the far off mass of shell and tendrils, closed her mind to the threats, and instead focused on the figure bowing lowly before her. At first, she was confused, trying to comb through her memories to find out who or what they were. It took a gentle kiss to the back of her fingers before she realized, and an embarrassingly long time to react afterwards.

"Sam? What are you—" She looked around them for his familiar, hulking companion. "Where's Techno? Did something go wrong? Is he alright?"

Did the Egg get to him too? Did Sam need her help? Were they all alright? Did someone die? She must have been getting quite worked up, as she felt Sam's soft, gloved hand cup her cheek, smoothing his thumb across the worried creases near her eyes.

"Hey, relax," he smiled. "Everything's fine, trust me."

Of course I trust you. I trust you, Sam. I trust you...

At least something rang true.

Something hammered against her skull, pounding at her mind and making her dizzy. She raised a hand to her head, scarlet overwhelm her.

"Puffy?"

She combed a hand back through her brown and white locks, trying to focus on something other than the whispers in her ears and the rawness of her throat. "Just... just give me a moment..."

"What's happening? Please, talk to me."

She tried to wave him off. "It's nothing, really... Just the Egg trying to come back again." She forced herself to think carefully. "I was fine, but then Bad made me drink some wine and..."

The wine.

Oh gods, *the wine*.

She briefly closed her eyes, muttering curses at both Bad and at her own naivety. Turning over a new leaf, what a joke! Why did she even believe that lie for a second?

"Poison..."

Sam's blunt growl brought her back and she looked up. He turned his head away, eyes narrowed behind his mask.

"I'm going to kill him."

"No, Sam, please!"

Puffy grabbed his arms, using all of her strength to hold him back just about to storm off to wherever he had spotted the culprit. The Egg laughed at her feeble attempt, but it could mock her all it wanted— Sam still stopped in his tracks and looked at her. She gripped him tighter.

"It's not worth it," she whispered, her head suddenly growing heavy. She let it fall against his chest, and breathed in deeply. "Blowing your cover isn't worth it, not for me."

"You are worth everything and more."

She barely heard him.

She craved warmth, she craved security. She craved everything the Egg was promising her, but she didn't want any of it from that creature. She couldn't let it win her over.

Sam's figure, at first fighting to get away and avenge her, had now anchored itself into the ground, his mind clearly changed. He held her gently. It was sweet how worried for her he was, but he really had nothing to be concerned about. The captain could get through this. She knew she could. She had to.

The red hue that bordered her vision when she blinked said otherwise.

She couldn't let it win.

"Dance with me?" she asked—no, pleaded, in fact.

The panicked hold on her slipped away, replaced by a firm hand around her waist and another holding her hand up. Puffy was pulled closer to him. The eyes that stared down were still concerned, yes, but also filled with the infinite kindness she loved so much, the kindness she felt was genuine, and the kindness she felt safe with.

Everything he offered, she knew the Egg could never ever get close to providing.

"Of course, anything for you."

Puffy could no longer tell if his tone was that of a simple tease or not. The Egg wouldn't let her work it out, but that didn't stop her face from heating up.

A soft tune began to play. Sam took a tentative step forward. She took one backwards in response, easing into the rhythm and into his gentle lead.

They melted into the twirling mass of the other dancers scattered around them like shiny seashells across a dark ocean seabed.

The ocean...

The floor spun before her when she looked down: deep and sparkling with the lights of the chandelier ready to drag her down to the bottom and slowly drain her final life from her body. Crimson swirled in front of her vision again. She tried to resist, in vain. Her eyelids began to flutter shut.

"Look at me," Sam whispered. "Focus on me, not on it. I'll get you through this, I promise."

Puffy nodded quickly, and struggled to keep herself conscious as they continued to step in time. The violin sighed and the grand piano hummed a velvet melody. There was something different about the dance they were caught up in, but the captain couldn't quite put her finger on it.

It wasn't as jolly as the one that played when they had first arrived, or the magnificent and powerful tango Bad had dragged her into that was worthy of the finest of ballrooms. This one was slower and cleaner, with longer strides and gentle spins that didn't make her head dizzy or her hands bleed with bone-crushing grips. They glided across the ballroom floor, as light and as fluid as air. Sam was an angel, occasionally whispering reassuring words into her ear and smiling at her throughout. His gentle mannerisms—from his hold on her to his kind words—matched their waltz to a tee. She felt like she was floating on clouds.

It seemed so, at least to her sane mind. A light and heavenly distraction. The crimson begged to differ. Occasionally, the vines in her eyes closed down her blissful, peaceful mindset.

When a step landed a little heavier than the rest, or when Sam's chest would puff up and shift against hers, her mind was sent reeling into another world. One darker than an airy waltz, draped with blood red, intoxicating passion and a low, thrumming melody. A world where speech disappeared into silence. A stuffy, wicked world in which Sam—her dancing partner, the masked phantom guiding her—was trying to coerce her with much more immoral and sinister intentions, to satisfy a hunger of his own. It was something she wouldn't have been able to resist or escape from, a point of no return she was so close to stepping over.

For a brief moment or two, she'd believe the Egg's hallucinations, not that they were necessarily and utterly *unpleasant*, so to say. The way the Egg made her think Sam held her, the desperate brutality perceived in its given sensations, was perhaps a little more welcome than she was ready to admit.

She would almost cave in to it, but Sam was always there to keep her in line.

"Focus on me," he repeated over and over, yanking her back to their own world, their little duo, where he was just *him*. No phantoms, no Egg — just him.

So focus she did. Her eyes would lock with his, and would stay that way. The Egg's influence would fade to the back of her mind, for a brief time of reprieve. Nothing else existed in that moment, except the two of them and the timeless music that had travelled through the ages.

A slow blink of his vibrant green eyes framed by the bone white rim of his mask, full of gentleness and honest affection, sent a warm feeling shooting up her spine. Her hands turned clammy, and she was suddenly much more aware of the beating of her heart and his hand on her waist.

Every glance she cast his way, every unconscious shift in Sam's body, every thunder she could feel in his chest and every warm swell in her own hammered another nail into her coffin.

She turned her attention to the dance instead, and the way they were moving suspiciously smoothly across the floor, much more so than any of the other guests.

"You know the song?" she asked in a hushed voice, a dizziness taking over her body.

"I danced to it a couple of times, long ago," Sam replied.

"You're good."

"Anyway, who doesn't know the great composers of the Old World?"

"Excuse me for growing up on sea shanties, then," Puffy teased, a weak giggle escaping her.

With a chuckle, Sam leaned in. "You know I didn't mean it like that," he said.

His voice, low and soft, created phantom breaths over her ears, and she forced herself to turn away. The red world of dangerous, dark desire washed once more through her

mind. She tried to banish it. She had been forcefully dragged into one mindset, one of fiery, venomous hisses and jeers from a demonic entity. She didn't have the strength to slip into another one, no matter how rich and inviting it was.

"Is it still talking to you?"

"A little."

"Don't listen to it, listen to me instead." His hand came up to tuck a curl behind her ear, lingering on her cheek for a while afterwards. "You are the most magnificent person in this room tonight."

She scoffed, "Really? Have you even *seen* Eret yet?"

"I don't need to. It's you, without a doubt. Is that so hard to believe?"

"Kind of." This time, it wasn't the Egg sowing doubts within her.

"Well it shouldn't be," Sam continued. "You are breathtaking, stunning, absolutely gorgeous."

He punctuated each word with a twirl, making her laugh and blush profusely.

"Sam!"

"Embarrassed?" he teased. "In that case I'd say it's working; I'm distracting you."

The Egg's whispers jumbled up and screamed bloody murder, but she didn't care.

Sam's words were working. They were working very well indeed.

So well that she wondered if they actually meant something, if they were more than just a bouquet of random compliments with no thought behind them.

Sam stroked another gentle thumb across her cheek, imploring her to hold his gaze. Puffy didn't need telling twice, but soon after she turned away once again, stifling a laugh.

"What's so funny?" he asked her.

"You."

"Me?" he spluttered.

"You make me laugh," she sighed, a silly smile painting her face, "and you make me happy."

She stood up on the tips of her hooves—at least to as far as she could reach without falling—and pressed her forehead against his. The mask that covered the upper half of his face was cold against her skin. She didn't like it. She wished she could feel *him*.

"As long as I'm keeping your mind off things," he hummed.

He dipped her down low, her back almost touching the floor, and the hem of her dress caught in crumpled bunches between his legs. Her arms found their way around his neck, circling his throat with soft touches.

Kill him, said the Egg. Snap his neck. Choke him.

She closed her eyes and tightened her grip, but not because the crimson was asking her to. He pulled her up and she stayed where she was, her arms reaching up around him. She buried her head in his shoulder.

Sam didn't say anything. The frame they had held for the majority of the dance was dropped. She felt his head lightly rest against her own, and strong arms wrap fully around her back.

For a little time after, they continued to move in circles with small, delicate steps, and then those too were cast aside. Their blissful waltz had turned into them both simply standing and holding each other, swaying gently from side to side. The song began to match their movements, or lack thereof, once again drifting off into a softer rendition of the melody. Then, it finally halted, fading like smoke into the air. A muffled commotion echoed all around them. The other dancers politely clapped for the band and scampered off to find a new dance partner.

Neither Puffy nor Sam moved a muscle, or said a single word. A bubble had been stretched all around them, blocking out the harsh, outside world and likewise concealing them from curious gazes.

And that was when Puffy was finally honest with herself.

She loved him, and there was nothing more to it.

She wanted to see him everyday, to wake up next to him in the mornings and fall asleep in his arms at night. She wanted to keep him close, as close to her heart as she could and never let him go again. Her entire being craved a single touch, a single kiss, even just a smile, all such simple yet precious things when they would come from him.

She wanted to go back to the barley field by the desert and let him pick her up, spin her around and love her in the way only he could. She wanted to live a happy life with the one she knew could give her that. The very thought made her giddy.

As a friend, she had cherished him as dearly and adoringly as one would cherish a lover. She *wanted* him to be her partner, to have the freedom to kiss the breath from his lips time and time again, to have him call her name and make it finally sound like hers.

The sudden landslide of confessions overwhelmed her. She gripped him tighter.

Perhaps she lost herself a bit in that moment, in the warmth, in the safety, and the loving embrace of it all. The space had narrowed down to just the two of them, their breaths, their touches and their heartbeats: they were alone.

Puffy wished dearly that they were. The red in her mind began to spread and with one final surge at last managed to invade all her senses. Sam's name fell off her lips before her knees finally buckled, and a crimson abyss beckoned.

"No, no, no!"

Sam held on tightly as she slumped into his arms, a panic rising within him. The captain had almost completely passed out, the only clue that she was still conscious being her sharp breaths and the slow heaving of her chest.

He raised his head and looked around frantically, searching for someone to call for help. None of his friends were near enough, and everyone else passed them both by without so much as a second glance.

"It's alright," – he leaned down to whisper into Puffy's ear – "you're not alone. I'm here, and I'm not leaving you."

Her voice was small, almost completely quiet. "I can't see anything..."

He caught a glimpse of her eyes, narrowed and darkened. Their dazzling, beautiful blue had bled into a bright scarlet, but they were far from the sharp evil that had become

apparent within other members of the Eggpire and among the infected. If anything, hers were still utterly gorgeous. She was fighting, a small part of her was *still fighting*. As long as she still was, he could do something about it.

But he still panicked.

"It's angry. It hurts. I don't want to go back to it." Her tone suddenly became more frantic, and desperate hands clawed at him. "I don't want to go back to it, Sam! Please! I can't... I..."

Sam's stomach plummeted. "You won't," he promised, "the Egg will have to take you over my dead body."

He tried supporting her as a crutch, but her knees buckled. Instead, he scooped her up in his arms and held her tightly to his chest. He looked left and right, then made their escape into the sidelines.

Although the coast had been clear of any members of the Eggpire, the Egg must have known what Sam was doing. Tendrils tried to trip him up, snaking around his feet and attempting to block their path. Sam fought on. The quick, frightened heartbeat against his made him. Eventually, he ducked them both behind one of the pillars holding up the roof. The shadows granted them a bit of privacy from prying eyes. Sam pressed his back against the tendrils before setting Puffy down on her shaky legs and pulling her securely against him. One more layer of protection between her and the Egg wouldn't go amiss. Again, the tendrils and thorns began to twist and curl, this time around his shoulders and his waist. He tore them off immediately.

"What's it saying?"

Puffy faltered, melting into him. "It wants me to kill you..."

The mere thought of her mind being taken over by and caving in to the Egg's temptation, being forced to go along with its whims and wants, made him feral. It brought out an instinct, just as powerful and painful as anything else in that situation.

He gripped her tighter and tighter. He felt like he was about to shatter every single one of her bones. He knew she was in there somewhere and as long as that hope was still there, he wouldn't budge. If he let her go, he knew he would no longer be able to stay docile. He would tear everything in his path apart, right down until he broke the Egg with his own two hands.

"Sam, I'm scared."

Fearless and fierce Captain Puffy, frightened. It was a rare sight, and one that didn't suit her in the slightest. The admission scared him greatly.

Puffy was cold, too cold for the warmth of the room and of his hold. In his arms, her body was akin to dead, frozen stone. It was like her final life was slowly being sucked from her frame. He panicked even more.

"Deep breaths," he instructed, holding her firmly. "In, and out. Can you do that for me?"

A few, raspy gasps escaped her, before devolving into pained whimpers. Sam coaxed her with more gentle words, and breathed with her until she matched his rhythm.

"Puffy, can you hear me?" he asked after a few minutes.

She nodded, shaking.

"It's alright, it can't hurt you unless you let it. You're stronger than the Egg in every way, and you won't let it win. That's what you told me when you and Tommy saved me, remember?"

Talk, keep talking.

"You told me not to focus on it, but on you two. I did, and I got through it. Now, *you've* got to focus on *me*, and only me. Listen to my voice, and only my voice."

Know that I'm here—

"Know that I'm here—"

—that the Egg will not win—

"—that the Egg will not win—"

—and that I love you more than you could possibly know.

He caught himself before the last sentence found its way to her ears. Tongue tied, he couldn't go on. Thankfully, it seemed he didn't need to. The rigid, trembling figure in his arms had softened and calmed down, and her arms had dropped from around herself. They instead found their way to him, wrapping around his back. A moment later, Puffy

looked up. Her eyes were still red, but it was starting to fade. His shield was working, and that only made him hug her tighter.

He couldn't save Bad, Ant, Ponk or anyone else, but he could save her.

"It was just a sip," she murmured, forcing out a weak smile.

Sam sighed in relief, combing his fingers through her hair. "It was just a sip," he agreed, anger still blazing towards Bad for offering her such a drug in the first place. Nevertheless, he tried to lighten the mood. "I thought that a sea captain would hold her drink a little better though."

"I would drink you under the table," she retorted with a light but strained giggle.

She no longer sounded indoctrinated per say, but rather exhausted. Exhausted, and sick, with a raw throat and bleary eyes.

All of a sudden, her hands reached up to his face and tried to pry off his mask. He stopped her, bringing her arms back down to her stomach.

She mumbled, "I want to see you."

"You know that this is my only cover, right?" he chuckled.

"You don't need it, you're handsome as you are."

He would have teased her about it – or even just given her a thank you of some sort – but she was clearly not in the right state for him to risk doing so. Instead, he shook his head.

"The Egg's still talking," he said, utterly unconvinced by his own words and trying to hide his blushing cheeks. Gods, he was really down *that* bad. "Try to wait until it's gone."

Something crawled around them both – a thick red tendril that curled up Sam's leg and over Puffy's waist. It wasn't tight and was an easy rope to untangle themselves from. It seemed to linger as more of a warning, a reminder that the Egg was still listening and drinking every drop of the scene up. Sam didn't care. Let it watch, and let it see how they were both so much more powerful than it was.

Puffy reached for his mask again and this time, he didn't fight back. He let her pry it off. With her thumb, she began to trace the long, thin scar that stretched over his right eye, over his nose bridge and down his left cheek. It was almost invisible to outsiders and

even to Sam himself, but now Puffy was tracing it perfectly, the feeling of the thin, precise knife that had raked down his skin came back to him.

Tracing scars wasn't an uncommon occurrence: in a land where wars broke out over anything and everything, battle wounds became one of the ways you could get to know someone. Scars were relics of History. If you let someone see your scars, it was a mark of trust, and an honour. Displaying your indestructible surface littered with damage was perhaps one of the most vulnerable moments you could have.

Sam had seen a few worrying collections during his time, including most of Tommy's, and had stuck a plaster on one or two when the boy picked at the unhealed scabs and made old wounds bleed again. And then, of course, Philza had given him the opportunity to work and heal his wings. Those damaged wonders were masterpieces in and of themselves.

But very few people saw Sam's own, even if a couple were in plain sight. He never talked about them, and yet Puffy had still managed to pick one of them out. He wondered just how long she had been looking to finally find it.

"I got that the first time I fought alongside Technoblade," he told her.

"I've always wondered," she mused, stroking it once again.

Sam gave her a small smirk, his eyes fluttering shut. "It's not a cat," he chuckled.

"But it's *you*."

He changed the subject, knowing that if he went down that route any further, their true mission that evening would be completely ignored.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm better, I think. Just drained..." Puffy curled up against him. "I'll be alright."

He sighed, and leaned further back against the pillar. The panic was over, and things were going smoothly once again. Thank the gods.

"I owe you my life."

"You don't owe me anything."

She didn't owe him a thing. She never would have to, and he'd never push her to.

"I had a nightmare about you last night," the captain said.

Sam tried to quieten his heart, and hide the nervous tremor in his tone. "Really?"

"I dreamed that we never managed to save you from Pandora's Vault in time. You died in my arms."

Sam held his breath, momentarily frightened, until he felt Puffy tremble and shake against him.

"It was just a nightmare," he said, letting her grip onto him as hard and for as long as she wanted to. "I'm here and I'm alive."

I'm not leaving you.

"It just felt so real," Puffy mumbled against him, "and I was terrified about tonight. I can't lose you again."

"You won't," Sam promised. "I swear, you won't."

My soul couldn't take it.

She looked up at him, seeming almost surprised by his answer. As if she hadn't expected him to make such a sincere promise. As if she was worried he'd break it. He wouldn't dream of it.

And then there was another moment, a small quiet break where the world was pushed away and out of their surroundings. An instant where there was only them, where Sam truly took time to take her in. Similar moments had been happening throughout the evening, and yet none of them had felt heavier than this one. So heavy that he felt his mind drift along with it, clouded by a dreamland of tenderness and abstract emotions he couldn't identify nor describe. As soon as his mind slipped, so did his head.

He started to lean in.

She didn't shy away when he did. She tilted her head. Her eyes fluttered shut.

He closed his own, and let himself sink.

"Not to alarm you both or anything," a voice grunted near them, "but I think the Egg thinks you're a pair of comfortable statues."

Sam snapped out of his dreamlike state just in time to feel something start to squeeze his throat. He drew back from Puffy. He untangled them both from the red tendrils. The vines and thorns showed no resistance and they emerged unscathed, except for a small nick the length of a thumb on the captain's cheek. The nightmare was quickly pushed to the back of his mind. Puffy was still unsteady on her hooves, occasionally swaying with hazy eyes, and she relied heavily on Sam's arm for support. He didn't mind in the slightest.

They met up with Technoblade and Sam gulped, awaiting a reprimand of some sort. Instead, all he got from the piglin was a friendly smile and a slightly concerned look towards Puffy.

Techno placed a hand on her arm, "Are you alright?"

She nodded, and leaned a little more into Sam's side. "Just an accident with the Egg," she said, then looked up at her crutch. "If Sam wasn't here, I don't know what I'd do."

Sam let out an embarrassed cough. "I didn't do that much, to be honest," he mumbled, his pride swelling when Techno's warm, encouraging eyes turned up to him.

"He'd do anything for you, I hope you know that, Puffy—"

"Techno!" Sam spluttered, turning red.

"I know," Puffy said, giving him a light shove, "and there's no way to talk him out of it."

"I could drop you right now," Sam suggested, starting to teasingly pull away.

Puffy held him firmly in place. "Don't you dare!"

Their joking around was soon broken by a loud, booming laugh as Technoblade burst into the conversation once again. "There'll be time for all that later," he said, "I just wanted to tell you that the right side of the cavern has been covered."

At the same time, more footsteps came towards them and before long, the Syndicate had reunited.

"I've covered the rest of the left side," Nikki said, then frowned when she saw Puffy's state. It took a soft, wordless smile from Sam for him to reassure her that everything was alright.

It took another moment for Sam to acknowledge Niki's knowing glance and with that, a smile. A blessing, of some sort.

"The back walls and around the Egg are done too!"

Ranboo spoke up brightly, too brightly and carefree to be genuine, and Sam noticed. He raised an eyebrow and he watched as the hybrid's fingers began to fiddle with his hair, but said nothing. Two more figures followed Ranboo, both decidedly looking worse for wear. Sapnap's normally bright and friendly face was twisted into a fiery expression, and Philza was holding his head and rubbing his nose bridge.

"Philza?" Technoblade asked, his voice betraying his concern. "Are you alright?"

The avian let out an irritated and pained sigh. "Perfectly fine, mate, if *Sapnap* hadn't knocked the living daylights out of me!"

The fireborn cast a murderous look askance, mouth pursed. Sam could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears, but he had a feeling that the frustration was due to something other than Phil's accusation. He just didn't know what and it was obvious that Sapnap wouldn't be the one to tell him.

Ranboo approached Techno, lowering his voice. "The Egg got a little too comfortable with Phil," he whispered.

Somehow, Technoblade didn't seem surprised by his best friend's state, or what the hybrid had just told them. He just nodded sombrely, as if a previous diagnosis had simply been confirmed.

Sam snapped his head up, looking over the hybrid's shoulder at Philza. The avian was in pain from the way he winced ever so often, but the hazy look behind his blue eyes – blotched with pale red like Puffy's – was no stranger to him.

"He'll be fine," he said reassuringly, turning back to the others. He stroked a gentle, absent-minded hand through Puffy's curls, smiling softly as she arched into his touch. "We need to keep these two as far from the Egg's source as possible, including during the feast."

"Good thinking," Nikki agreed, "but until then, we have some time to kill."

A split second later, she grabbed Ranboo's hand, and dragged him towards the dancefloor which was once more filling up with people. The hybrid let out a surprised

squawk, resisting just a little bit. The height difference as the girl shuffled him into a suitable dance position was very noticeable, and quite funny to see. Just before they stepped out, Nikki turned back to the group, her soft features alight and smiling.

"Puffy, Sam," she said, looking at them each in turn, "you both owe me a dance sometime tonight!"

"Yes," Ranboo agreed, his eyes veiled with fear but his smile betraying his amusement. "Save me soon, please."

He mouthed something along the lines of "*I don't know how to dance!*" and then he and Nikki were off, joining the rest of the mingling guests.

Someone sighed beside them, and the tip of Philza's wings brushed Sam's back. "I haven't danced for so long," he said wistfully, his tone a little nasal.

When Sam looked at him, he could see the inside of his nostrils glow red. Apart from that there seemed to be no lasting damage from Sapnap's punch, no matter how hard it probably was. A shadow stretched over them, and Techno bowed to his avian companion.

"Will you give me the honour of allowing me to take you to the floor then?"

Phil smiled and took Techno's arm. "How could I refuse?"

"Hey," Sam protested, stifling a laugh, "Techno said I was first!"

The piglin scoffed in return, and tutted. "You have your arms full already, don't get too greedy." He and Philza prepared to follow Nikki and Ranboo's lead. "Are you coming?"

The question was directed more towards Sapnap, and he must have felt it by the way he lifted his head ever so slightly. He looked unbelievably mournful and on edge. When faced with Technoblade's invitation, he ended up shaking his head.

"I've still got some sand left," he muttered, striding off. "You guys have fun, I'll go and make sure everywhere else is covered."

Before any of them could call him back, he disappeared into the party with the air of a miserable mongrel. Sam wanted to go and make sure he was alright. Then again, he knew his friend, and he'd be lucky to get away with a mild burn to his face or arm for being too nosy. Instead, he forced himself to keep back and stay beside the one who

really *did* need his help then and there. He could do nothing more than spare a thought for Sapnap.

Suddenly, the string quartet picked up again, and the piano began to pluck a gentle, upbeat tune, reminiscent of thawing landscapes and brighter days.

Sam turned to Puffy, who was still clinging on to his arm. No longer shaking, she was steadier on her feet and with her breathing. Her eyes were still a little glassy and speckled with red, but otherwise were as clear as two, sparkling diamonds, turned towards the dancefloor and watching as their friends laughed and pranced in their own little group off to the side. Again, they seemed to be invisible from the rest of the guests, in a different world entirely: one made up of brave, pure-hearted criminals and poor, looked down upon heroes. Perhaps that was what gave them the courage to laugh so loudly and enjoy themselves as loudly and as wildly as they were. They just didn't care what anyone thought of them anymore. Sam couldn't help but agree with Puffy's small, eager smile that tugged at his heartstrings and made him want to follow their lead.

"Do you want to go and join them?" he asked aloud, watching the captain's expression carefully.

"In a bit," she replied, resting once more against his chest, "I just need you here a little longer."

The Egg's influence was wearing down, and Sam's own shield was helping to protect her, but for now, she was still weak. She still needed to be distracted, to draw her mind away from the Egg. She had reportedly done it once, she could do it again. He knew she could. He led her away from the golden shine, towards a small, jutting out rock against the wall that had been fashioned into a bench. He helped her down, then took his place next to her.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. Much better."

He watched as she relaxed, leaning back against a gnarled tendril. As with most of the growths present at the masquerade that held up the ceiling, lights, drapes or tipsy guests, it was holding something, wedged between its thorns: a crimson flower arrangement similar to the ones scattered all around the room in wreaths and bright garlands. A row of red tulips and scarlet roses crowned Puffy's head, scattering petals across her white and brown curls.

The denial finally and fully evaporated. Even though Sam was part creeper, he couldn't explode literally. The feeling itself came and went with strong emotions, but it never grew any further. And yet, as he watched the captain settle against the wall of flowers and initiate a light-hearted conversation, he felt something implode in his chest, sending a jolt through his entire being.

He had a sneaking suspicion that it was his heart.

Chapter Sixty-One: Sightings

"Oh, and we call that one the Elephant, courtesy of Michael!"

Tommy squinted into the distance. In the midst of the blanket of pure white that coated the landscape, he could just make out a strangely shaped hump with an eye-like hole, where the snow had melted around a rock in the hillside. He tilted his head to get a better perspective, and could *maybe* just see what could look like a long trunk. What a young child might consider a trunk, anyhow.

"Yeah, I can sort of see," he hummed, trying to sound convinced.

Tubbo grinned back. "Isn't it cool? And it's always there!"

"An eternal snowdrift?"

"Yeah!"

"How does that even work?"

"Oh, well the temperature here never exactly drops."

Tommy shrugged his coat tighter around his shoulders and buried his face in the "scarf" around his neck. Sam Nook adjusted his tail around the boy's jaw until it fit snugly, then he himself stuffed his muzzle into the crook of his neck.

Tubbo was right about that: Snowchester was pretty fucking cold.

Tommy said he wouldn't come back anytime soon, but once Tubbo had essentially coerced him with puppy dog eyes and his warm, friendly smile, he had no choice but to

obey him. Also, Tubbo had been extremely excited to give him a proper tour of his snowy settlement. Tommy was not about to burst a happy bubble, least of all his best friend's.

That's how he ended up here – on Snowchester's snowy ramparts in the middle of the night, looking out over the frozen landscape and shivering in the chilly air with a raccoon around his shoulders. The blazing torches and the fires in the watchtowers burned brightly, and Tommy instinctively moved closer to one of them for the smallest bit of heat. His eyes burned from the completely white landscape; his ears whistled and stung from the sharp wind; and his whole body was as cold as a block of stone.

"Isn't this wonderful?" Tubbo suddenly exclaimed.

He whooped out into the empty tundra beyond the walls. His cry echoed over the snowdrifts, down the cobbled road, over the Nether portal and all the way to the ocean line in the distance. He laughed, then turned to the other boy.

"Why don't you try it, Big Man?"

Tommy perked up, startled. "Huh?"

"You know, *scream*! Give it a good, long and loud scream. It does tons of good, I can tell you that."

Tommy hesitated, then looked down into the snow piled up at the bottom of the ramparts. It stuck to the stone bricks like strands of silky cobwebs. Beyond that, the snowflakes shimmered in the moonlight, crystalized and perfect, only blemished by the straight, slush covered road that linked Snowchester's doors and the Nether portal. It shone a dark silver in the night. Even the howling wind had a certain beauty to it, if he listened really closely. Everything almost seemed too perfect, and he didn't want to break it up.

However, he had to admit that destroying harmony was his forte.

So he leaned further out, his neck stretched out over the ramparts. The raccoon around his shoulders squealed in terror and slipped away. The frozen wind cut over his newly exposed skin like the sharp sting of a guillotine, and he almost expected his blood to start dripping into the snow below. He kept his gaze trained on the dark horizon, on the thin strip in the distance that made up the mainland. He stared long and hard, and opened his mouth.

Then his eyes flicked over to the side, and landed on the dark, rigid silhouette of Pandora's Vault out in the middle of the ocean.

For the first time in forever, his voice failed him and nothing came out. He stood there a while longer, leaning out into the night with his mouth hanging open like a fish. He hesitated, then reeled himself back in, the tips of his ears turning red out of humiliation.

"Sorry," he mumbled to his friend as Sam Nook settled back around his neck.

"It's alright, Tommy," Tubbo replied, and the boy felt him place a gentle hand on his shoulder.

But Tommy was angry with himself. He stamped his foot against the icy stone under his feet and crossed his arms in front of his chest. Why did he always scream when he shouldn't and couldn't when he should? Why couldn't he listen? Why couldn't he do one thing for a friend who had sacrificed so much for him? Why was he so fucked up?!

Take a wild guess, Tommy, take a wild guess.

"You're not fucked up."

Tommy froze, retreating back into himself once he realized he had spoken aloud.

"Tommy, you're not fucked up," Tubbo repeated, moving closer.

Tommy resisted the urge to push him away. "That's a lie and you know it. I'm fucked up, you're fucked up, we're all fucked up here."

He knew Tubbo was too smart to try and contradict him. He knew. Tommy knew. Some would call the whole thing an overreaction: the two boys simply called it the gospel truth. And who's fault was that? Who screwed them up beyond the point of no return and made them know it?

"Bastards," Tubbo muttered somewhere beside him.

"Bastards," Tommy nodded in breathy agreement.

That simple word, that one insult, told them everything they needed to know or communicate to one another. Two teenage boys that could paint entire worlds, or rather paint a picture of hate, with a single word. It was magical. *They* were magical.

And they were back together. That should have been enough for Tommy, enough to make him smile – and enough to rip a stupid scream from his lungs. He knew better.

"Hey, what's that?" he suddenly asked in a brisk change of subject. A feeble golden light in the distance had caught his attention, along with the sound of approaching, crunching footsteps and barking dogs.

Tubbo led him along the ramparts until they came to a watchtower. The young ram helped the boy climb on top of it and with the light burning against his back, Tommy got a better look at the newcomers.

Across the way, where Snowchester's decidedly rocky terrain bled into the flat plains of the tundra, a small group made up of ten people or so were slowly trudging towards the wall, bundled up in thick furs, armour and holding swaying lanterns. A pack of thick-furred snow dogs bounded in and out of their feet, yapping and playfully snarling at each other. From what Tommy could see, however, their masters were far from as happy and carefree as their animals were.

A creak resonated below their feet and before long, another, similar group left the safety of Snowchester's walls and went to join the newcomers on the heavily iced impasse that bridged the wild tundra and Snowchester together. Tommy was too far away to hear properly, but he could see well enough. A few words between the two groups' respective leaders were shared, and the lanterns were passed on. Then, the first group headed back towards Snowchester, and the second began to trudge off into the night, following the footsteps that were just starting to be erased by the brewing snowstorm.

Tommy followed the returning battalion with his eyes, just before they ducked into the walls below them and vanished. One of the returning people – a bull hybrid, Tommy guessed from the sharp horns with black tips that protruded from either side of their head and the thick copper ring threaded through his nostrils – looked up at the watchtower, and at the two figures looking down at them. They solemnly let their gaze drop, and shook their head.

Tommy looked over at Tubbo. His friend's eyes were glued to the bull hybrid, and a sigh escaped his lips. He gave the other a nod and a small smile, but the boy watched as he dragged his bottom lip through his teeth, clearly troubled. Once the newcomers had dispersed, their cacophony now coming from behind them as they began to file into Snowchester, Tommy turned to Tubbo.

"What's that all about?" he asked.

Tubbo took a moment before replying. "Patrols," he finally said. "I've sent them into the tundra as an extra precaution. I don't think Technoblade has an army to spare."

Still not completely understanding the whole situation, Tommy snorted in amusement. "Tubbo, he *is* the army," he snickered.

To his surprise, the young ram barely cracked a smile, instead staring off into the snow with a concerned, vacant look. "They keep coming back empty handed. They bring back nothing but frostbite and the snow on their boots."

Tommy had lived in Techno's tundra for a little while, back when he was exiled and had decided to run away from his blown-up beach. He hadn't been back since, knowing full well that he wasn't welcome. That was alright by him: Technoblade was an ass and he hated the frozen weather. But the fact that Tubbo was purposely sending battalions out into that area of the land piqued his interest.

What was he planning? A war? A revolution? Another venture similar to that of the Butcher Army's?

If any of those were indeed the case, then Tommy was well and truly fretting for Tubbo's safety. He couldn't lose him again, especially to someone so much stronger than him. If Technoblade killed Tubbo again, then Tommy wouldn't stop until he strangled the bloodthirsty piglin with his own two hands – or most likely, he'd die trying.

"What are you expecting them to find there?" he asked tentatively, fearing the worst.

Tubbo turned to him, and in a gesture that Tommy didn't expect, uttered one word. "Dream."

The boy's entire world shattered before him. The walls of denial he had been building up since the prison break came crumbling down, shaken by the explosion of that one, simple name.

Dream.

It all came back to him.

Dream had escaped Pandora's Vault. Dream had killed Sam. Dream had disappeared off the face of the earth, taking whatever lies, deception and evil plans he had with him. He may have been gone, but Tommy knew him enough to know that he wasn't gone for long. He'd come back, he always did. Danger and worldwide hate didn't scare him in the

slightest. If anything, Dream would come back simply because he felt like it. He'd come back to wreak havoc and take numerous lives for fun.

For fun.

And Tommy had a feeling that he was right at the top of that smiling madman's happy little hit-list.

His body went cold, much colder than the wind and the icy stone ramparts and no amount of thoughts of summer's days or layers of clothing could warm him up.

"D... Dream?" he gulped, throat scratchy and dry. "You're looking for Dream?"

Tubbo shrugged, visibly closing in on himself. He looked just as distressed as Tommy by the nightmare's name and Tommy had no idea how to comfort him. How could he console someone over something he too feared with all his heart and soul?

"Lots of people are," the young ram muttered. "Eret sent out the suggestion to all the nations, and we've been sparing anyone we can for searches. They say that Las Nevadas might have picked up a clue that leads his trail to the west, but we all know how *trustworthy* Quackity's words can be..."

He was just trying to fill the silence, Tommy could tell. He was trying to talk through it, hold his head high and direct the conversation back to governmental business, a topic with which the young ram was familiar, safe and experienced. For a moment there, Tommy saw a brief glimpse of President Tubbo peep through the long bangs that curtained his friend's forehead and eyes. It was brief, but it was there – Tommy couldn't help but automatically correct his posture. Force of habit.

"Tommy, I'm terrified."

The boy choked down a cry, his guilt overwhelming him. "I'm sorry—"

"No, this has nothing to do with you. Dream was bound to escape anyways – it's Dream, for crying out loud! No matter what anyone tried to do, no matter how many layers of protection Sam would have put on the Vault, he would have found a way to escape. But I mean... *shit!*" Tubbo's voice rocketed to a higher pitch, and he looked like he was about to crumble. "Shit, Tommy! He's out!"

He was screwing things up even while in prison.

The stolen life under Tommy's skin began to sting him, a burning reminder that Dream wasn't the only culprit of *that* crime.

"You know, I thought that we'd be safe for a while!" Tubbo was still talking, still rushing to stuff the silence with thoughts and words. "I really did! You were getting on so well, and so was I! We were healing and moving on from L'Manberg and... and..." He gulped, and Tommy could just see a few tears run down his cheeks. "And then that green bastard killed you, and he manipulated Ranboo, and then he killed Sam, and then..."

Tommy pulled Tubbo into his arms.

They were strong together, and they always would be – but when Dream was involved, suddenly they seemed to lose all their power. Their physical strength, their battle prowess, and their ability to survive mental and emotional attacks. Everything seemed to dissolve and from an unstoppable, legendary duo, they began to crumble just like their home had. They crumbled together, always together.

"I want my mum," Tubbo squeaked, then retreated into Tommy's chest.

There, in the light of the burning fire, Tommy held his best friend as the ram bleated with terror, loudly yearning for something safe and stable to hang on to. Tommy wished he could be that anchor, he really did, but he was just as close to breaking down as Tubbo was.

He'd be lying if he didn't admit that he shared Tubbo's need. He wanted... someone. He wanted someone older that cared for him. He wanted them to hold him close, card a soft hand through his golden hair, wash his doubts and terrors away with nothing but kind words and their hug.

He wanted his parents, the ones he had never met and that had decided to die on him when he was just a baby.

He wanted Philza, even if that bastard had made it clear that *he* didn't want *him*.

He wanted Wilbur – but he was dead.

Like Tubbo, he wanted Puffy, with her good advice, lighthearted jokes and caring attitude.

And he wanted Sam.

Oh gods, he *needed* Sam – but he was dead too, and he knew exactly whose fault that was. Like a heavy shackle clamped around his throat, it was a knowledge he could never shake off. The guilt was always there, always haunting him – the shackle took the form of a chocolate brown raccoon, always there, always around his shoulders.

"I'm scared too," Tommy told his best friend, trying so hard not to break into tears too. "But you know what?"

"W... What?"

"We've beaten Dream before." Tommy's gaze hardened, and he felt Tubbo pull away from him. "We'll beat him again, and again, and again, until we finally rip his last life from him."

He could feel Tubbo's eyes on him, wide and startled. "Tommy—"

"We will, won't we?" Tommy insisted, turning to his friend.

Tubbo didn't reply at first, simply turning his head towards the tundra patrol in the distance, their golden lanterns bouncing along the snow before being swallowed up by a flurry of snowflakes.

"Tubbo?"

"I don't know..."

Well, at least he was being honest. That's all Tommy wanted from him. They couldn't know for sure what the future would hold for them. They could die in the next couple of minutes for all they knew.

He was soon dragged out of his thoughts by the tapping of Tubbo's hooves and boots against the stone floor of the watchtower.

"Have you ever noticed that before?" the ram asked.

"Noticed what?"

"That."

Tommy followed Tubbo's finger, outstretched towards the far away, coastal strip of land belonging to the Badlands. Across the sea, they couldn't see much of their mainland neighbours – except for the dark, looming mass of the Vault and the shining white

mansion that sat perched on a cliff near it. It was always just a faraway strip of white calcaire cliffs. At least, that's what Tommy remembered it to be. He certainly didn't recall it being red.

There was no way it was the rising sun: the moon had only just reached its peak, and the stars were not going anywhere anytime soon. No, it looked like the Badlands were bleeding.

Tommy squinted. "What is it?"

Beside him, Tubbo shook his head. "I don't know," he replied, and the boy could detect a tremor in his tone, "but Puffy and Ranboo said they were going to the mainland tonight..."

Tommy's stomach twisted. "This is bad," he gulped. "Do you think they're in danger?"

"I don't know..."

Tubbo's voice was small and frightened, his ears twitching frantically. Tommy couldn't blame him, especially when the young ram began to canter off, beckoning the boy along with him.

"We need to see what's going on," he explained. "People might be in danger."

Tommy certainly didn't want anyone else to die because of his own carelessness. Then again, any opportunity to get out of the frozen land of Snowchester was greatly appreciated, international genocide or not.

Their trek through the Nether was mostly uneventful – without counting the less than secure routes Tubbo had chosen to drag them through. The ram favoured the paths still under construction that gave out onto the lava lakes rather than the slightly longer, yet safer ones that bordered the shores. He leapt across them with surprising agility and the jump boost his legs gave him, and Tommy had to rush and skid across the half-finished cobblestone bridges to keep up. Even though Tommy was usually the one up for dangerous ventures and reckless behaviour, the Nether made him queasy and he had to truly brace himself at every step. The lava beckoned, and he didn't like that. He hated that. It reminded him of exile.

But then again, the stifling and treacherous paths of the fiery dimension suddenly seemed like a paradise when they stepped out of the Greater SMP's portal. In fact,

anything would seem like a paradise compared to what they were seeing in front of them right then and there.

Tommy hated so many things, from Dream's guts to broccoli, but he had almost forgotten one of his more recent dislikes. That was, until he was caught up in it again.

Beside him, Tubbo grabbed his hand, and Sam Nook leapt down from his shoulders and grabbed his other one with his little paw.

"What the—"

"—fuck."

Velvet's first few days in the realm had been... eventful, to say the least.

HBomb had kept his promise, and had managed to set the newcomer up with a room in The Big Manifold Hotel, a tall red and white building that sat on a roadside knoll in the Greater SMP. The bald man who ran it was a little short tempered and agitated, or so Velvet had gathered from their first, late-night interaction, but he was certain that Mr Manifold was just stressed out by the bookings. Apparently, they had tripled in recent days, and lots of people were seeking close, overnight accommodation on one particular night.

Once he had settled in his room, Velvet double checked the Red Banquet invite HBomb had kindly given him – sure enough, the date of the masquerade and Mr Manifold's loud mutters lined up perfectly. It was a big deal after all.

That first night in his strange new surroundings, part of him had wished that the banquet was to be held that very next day. He was so eager to see Antfrost, and even more eager to slap him. For HBomb certainly, just as he had promised, but for himself too.

Antfrost hadn't written to him for months. *Months*. It was like he had vanished off the face of the earth entirely, without a single trace of him left behind save for the silver ring Velvet refused to take off. It was slightly damaged now, and most of the silver shine had been rubbed off by friction against rough dough or running water, but it was still there, still in one piece.

Velvet had been worried sick, only to discover that Ant was very much alive and well – well enough at least to plan a party. He could do that, but he couldn't simply just tell Velvet that he was alright.

Velvet loved Antfrost more than he could possibly say, but as his hours in the Greater SMP began to tick on, his anger had begun to rise. From his hotel room window, he watched for days as carts and merchants filed over a nearby border, heading towards a white mansion built along the coastline. He stared at the large bouquets of carnations, tulips and roses, the long rolls of silk and satin curtains and at the chests of dinnerware, and he had found himself wondering desperately which ones his beloved would lay his paws on.

He was going to confront that cat, and he was going to give him hell. He was going to give him hell, and then he was going to hold him close and melt into his fur, unable and unwilling to let him go ever again.

Until then, however, he had to wait, and so he had spent his time down at The Catmaid – not to drink himself silly like all the other poor sods there, but to talk with HBomb. The less-than inconspicuous bartender was an odd and quirky fellow, but he was the only person akin to a friend Velvet had on these shores, and he was going to take advantage of that.

It seemed that HBomb was delighted by the extra, well-mannered patron to add to his usual roster, and always greeted him with a smile and a meal or two, on the house. When he didn't have too much work, he'd also take the time to sit with Velvet, and they'd just talk.

Through HBomb, Velvet became a lot more acquainted with the history of the Greater SMP, and the recent news. He would have been a fool not to admit that lots of it terrified him, and a deep sadness overwhelmed him when HBomb told him about the unfortunate events regarding Pandora's Vault. He knew about the prisoner escaping, but he hadn't heard about the main casualty caught in the crossfire.

"The warden died in the struggle, and that's how the Badlands lost one of its leaders. Really tragic, isn't it? They say they never got his body out, forever interred in his own creation."

A deep sadness had overwhelmed Velvet, and he had fallen silent. He didn't know Sam, but he felt like he did from what Antfrost had told him in his letters. He considered him a friend, to a degree, and the news of his death had hit him just as hard as everyone

else. However, he wasn't there to talk about himself, and so he responded with a simple nod of acknowledgement.

At least he was up to date with some things, and corrected on others. Rumours were certainly not as trustworthy as they first appeared, especially ones that travelled far over oceans. Velvet knew that now.

Some stories were sugarcoated, and some were overreacted to the extremes. That simply made all the tales he had heard from HBomb just that bit scarier.

He had to get his mind off things, and the only way he could – there in a realm unknown to him, with so few friends and supplies – was with his profession: baking. So he talked HBomb into letting him help out a bit in his joint, and for the next few days leading up to the Red Banquet, Velvet threw himself into his work.

Black Forest gâteau, cupcakes, muffins, hot cross buns, cheesecake...

That's what he was good at, that was what he made his living off of, and that was what he was renowned for: baking delicious treats. There was a reason his business back home had been booming – and why he himself was named after the dark, rich Red Velvet cake. He was destined for his profession.

His sense of duty to his craft was what made him stay when Antfrost decided to travel. Then again, if Velvet had known that trip would have lasted much longer than a year and ended up with Ant heading an entire nation, then he would have dropped everything in a heartbeat to join his beloved.

To say that HBomb and his customers were appreciative of what he did would be a gross understatement. Velvet's work was revered as godlike in the ghostly streets of the harbour, and soon everyone began to flock to The Catmaid for a single lick of his butterscotch icing, or a slice of his soft and sweet pandoros and creamy Saint Honoré cakes. Yet, in a land still unknown to him, populated by scarred war veterans, bandits and crooks, Velvet couldn't help but wonder.

Were they *really* coming for his food, or rather to occupy themselves and get out of their collective fear of the escaped convict? Velvet had a feeling it was a bit of both, but as long as the people were happy and he could keep himself busy, it wasn't his business to pry any further.

HBomb however seemed to have another opinion on the matter, and had decided that his newly hired help absolutely needed to know about everyone else's life. The catmaid

would lean against the wall, lazily polishing a glass while Velvet pounded some dough, and tell him the full life story of every individual in their peripheral vision. Velvet had a hard time distinguishing everyone and remembering their respective stories – especially while tirelessly stuffing pastries and icing beautiful cakes – but he sure tried.

The parts he did remember, he found himself thinking about a lot. Many of these poor souls were down on their luck, and always had been. Their days in many a war had been anything but glamorous, and those who turned to less-than legal schemes did so out of desperation. Some of them were barely even teenagers, and those were the ones that had kept Velvet up at night, heart throbbing with compassion and his head reeling with different imaginings, each just as impossible to achieve as the last.

No matter how hard Velvet's life may have seemed at that moment, someone always had it worse, and always would. He knew that many of The Catmaid's patrons would kill, quite literally, for the mostly uneventful life he had led up until then.

"These lands can be incredible and welcoming when it wants to be," Hbomb had said. "Otherwise, they're vicious, and they'll swallow you whole."

When he had told him that, at first, Velvet hadn't taken him seriously with his maid dress and little tinkling bells sewed to his faux-fur ears and tail, but soon the words sunk in. He took them to heart, treating them as his own, personal survival guide.

So he kept his eyes down, his mouth shut, his ears open, and his hands busy.

That's all he could do, until the night of the Red Banquet rolled around.

The day before, Velvet went out to one of the few tailors still brave enough to remain open during such a time, and spent a small fortune on a suit and a bejeweled mask. Then, he returned to The Catmaid, deciding to try and calm his mounting nerves with a good drink and a friend to vent to. Even then, he kept asking for the time and a number of refills of his glass. He was honestly hoping to get drunk and erase his consciousness for the next few, difficult hours. However, HBomb had clearly seen through his façade, and stopped him.

"You can't meet Antfrost for the first time in ages slurring your words like my alcoholic grandmother and smelling like a brothel!"

Velvet's glass had been carefully pried from his hand and with nothing else to hold on to, he let his head fall against the table. His fierce drive, his avid determination, had been reduced to meaningless crumbs.

He groaned. "And what if everything fails? What if all of this amounts to nothing?"

HBomb had given him a good, hard stare, then had sighed. "Don't make me tip cold water on you and ruin that suit," he threatened. "Everything will be *fine*, Velvet. You just need to believe it will be."

That was much easier said than done, and when Velvet finally set foot on the dark, polished floors of the cavern venue, all his previous fears returned.

For starters, he didn't know anyone there. He recognized a few customers, but he wasn't friends with them: their interactions had never amounted to more than a "*hello*", a "*goodbye*", a "*your food is delicious*" and a "*thank you*". He couldn't exactly just go up and strike up a conversation, and with HBomb staying behind that evening – to clean up his joint, he had said, although Velvet wondered if it wasn't also out of spite for not being hired at the banquet – Velvet was well and truly alone.

Second of all, he now knew the true story behind the Egg, and what it had really done to so many people. It wasn't as Antfrost had said, "*beneficial and not considered a hindrance*": it was an absolute menace. The Red Banquet clearly had ulterior motives, and Velvet wanted to be caught up in none of that. He cautiously refused any wine or food presented to him by insistent waiters, his nerves unable to let him ingest anything anyway. All he wanted was to find Antfrost and get them both out of there.

Dazzled by the splendor of the room and the guests' attire, haunted by the crimson tendrils and sick from the tumultuous butterflies in his stomach, he couldn't do anything but linger on the sidelines and peer at every masked face, hoping that one of them would be his beloved's.

But there were so many people – too many, in fact – and his insignificance in their eyes caused him to be pushed back against the walls. Eventually, he stopped in his tracks, and melted into the shadows. The tendrils covering the wall behind him twisted and throbbed as he leaned against them, but he couldn't care less. He kept staring at every passing figure, hoping, praying. Every wish went unanswered.

Velvet wanted to cry, but he knew full well that it wouldn't solve anything.

So he kept his eyes and ears open, his mouth shut and his wits about him. He kept scouring the world in front of him and getting his hopes up everytime a feline hybrid plodded past – yet there was only so much attention span he could have before his anxiety pulled him out of his task at hand. His senses began to wonder, until his eyes landed on a couple not too far across from him.

They were sitting on a bench jutting out from the cavernous wall and talking in soft, hushed voices. One had his back to Velvet, his height even while sitting partially blocking his view of the other. The second figure, from what Velvet could see, was a pretty little sheep hybrid, with soft, bouncy white and brown curls and wearing a long, red satin gown. She was gazing at her partner, and even from behind her mask, Velvet could see the soft infatuation in her eyes he himself was no stranger to. He looked away, his heartache growing more by the second. Nevertheless, his ears still insisted on eavesdropping into their conversation.

"Wait, what's that?"

Velvet risked a look over, and watched as the taller figure reached over to the sheep, a gloved hand gently tilting her head up and stroking a small, almost indiscernible scar on her neck. Again, the care with which he did so only pained Velvet even more and reminded him of what he had lost, and he averted his eyes again.

"Who... who did that to you?"

The figure's voice noticeably lowered and trembled, as if he was trying to hold in a storm that was about to explode. An overreaction for such a small, insignificant scratch mark.

"You did," a soft, female voice replied.

A tense moment passed, and even Velvet held his breath.

It was a while before the other spoke. "What...?"

"The prison, back when Dream asked me to visit him. When you snapped and held me at trident-point..."

"I... I didn't realize I hurt you..."

"Neither did I," the sheep said, letting out a small laugh.

But Velvet could tell from the tension still there that the other was terrified. Not of the sheep, but obviously of himself and what he had apparently done.

Velvet also couldn't help but take note of the word "prison", and of the brief mention of the convict that used to be locked within the walls of Pandora's Vault.

"How could you ever forgive me...?"

Velvet glanced over again, too curious for his own good, just in time to see the first figure pull away from his partner. Almost in a flash, she pulled him back to her again.

"No, Sam, it wasn't your fault," she said to him. "I deserved it, I betrayed your trust."

Velvet froze at the name. He didn't know why at first: it could have very well been someone else named Sam. It wasn't such an uncommon name, after all. But then again...

Prison. Dream. Sam.

No... It couldn't be...

HBomb said that—

"Oh my gods, I almost killed you..."

Sam held his head in his hands, still visibly shaken by everything.

Clearly, he had no idea how Velvet was feeling right there and then, his heartache over Ant now overpowered by shock.

There was no way to tell if what was going on was real or just a dream – perhaps Velvet was hallucinating. Yes, that was it: he was going insane, his worry over his beloved corrupting his mind and making him believe whatever he wanted to. Who knows, maybe even the Egg was involved, or some sort of paranormal phenomenon. Maybe he was seeing a ghost. Maybe his drink at The Catmaid was spiked in some way.

Sam was dead, or so he had been told, and yet here he apparently was, sitting with his back to Velvet. There was only one way to be sure.

"Sam?"

As soon as he spoke the name aloud, he realized he had made a mistake. A mistake that also thankfully brought a confirmation.

Sam looked around with wide, startled eyes. They were dark and shining, with blackened sclera.

"Sam's a creeper hybrid," Antfrost had written to him once, years ago, "or, he seems to be, partially at least. He told me he was cursed, which I can sort of believe. He's much more human than creeper, that's for sure, but if you saw him, you couldn't exactly miss his freckles or his eyes."

He couldn't see the freckles on his cheeks – the man's skull-like mask covering them – but he was stillfaced with a striking resemblance to Antfrost's description. But the suspicion and hostility that he was eyed with made his skin crawl, and he backed off a little.

"Are you Sam?" he gingerly asked, making the effort to be a lot more polite.

All of a sudden, the back of Velvet's head crashed against the cavern wall, and found himself pinned to the tendrils by a pair of strong hands. Fingers clawed into him, and he had a feeling that he would have bruises for days. He let out a yell of surprise, before cowering under a stormy glare that pierced through his soul. Blue eyes bore into him, speckled with flecks of red the same colour as the dangerous crimson all around them.

"Who wants to know?" his captor snarled, and Velvet realized that it was that same, sweet-looking sheep he had been watching only moments before.

He had no idea how she had so much strength in her decidedly small frame, and he squirmed in her grasp. He opened his mouth again to call for help, but was quickly silenced.

"Scream again and it'll be your last," the sheep threatened with a snarl, her hand wrapped around his neck.

"Please!" Velvet gasped, short of air. "I mean no harm! I have to talk to him, it's urgent!"

"Unfortunately, Sam's dead, so you can forget that—"

"Puffy, it's alright."

A tall figure appeared behind his attacker, and large gloved hands carefully pried her fingers off from around Velvet. Once released, he crumpled to the floor, gasping and trying to compose himself. Some surprisingly helpful tendrils helped him stand, and he focused again on the two people in front of him.

Sam was carefully leading Puffy – that name too sounded familiar to Velvet, from Antfrost's letters – and sat her back down on the bench. He leaned in and whispered something into her ear, which Velvet couldn't catch. A moment later, the sheep hybrid nodded, and her body relaxed into the other's touch.

Sam cast a couple of glances around them, then beckoned Velvet closer. With a gulp, he obeyed and sat down beside him, still eyeing Puffy cautiously. She made no move to

attack him again, and he allowed himself to focus on the man in front of him. The pure hostility in his eyes had died down, replaced by a cold glare of suspicion and wariness. Velvet shifted, uneasy.

"Who are you?" Sam finally asked him, his voice sharp and stern.

Velvet didn't answer immediately, still taking in the towering stature that was looming over him. In the shadows of their seating, there was something terrifying about the way the few shards of light lit him up. Looking at him again, especially taking into account the regality of his clothes and the phantom glow of the mask framing his eyes, yes: Velvet could indeed believe that he was a leader of some sort. A powerful one at that.

Everything about him seemed dark and strict, far from the gentleness and moment of vulnerability Velvet had seen him bear with Puffy mere minutes ago. Sam edged in front of him, blocking Velvet's view of her. He knew it was to avoid her attacking him again, but he also had a strong suspicion that it was to protect *her* from any potential danger Velvet might bring as well. He swallowed hard, knowing full well that he wasn't necessarily welcome right there and then. He almost got up and left, but he couldn't. He had a job to do, and questions to ask and answer.

He took a deep breath. "My name is Velvet," he began, trying to keep his voice even. "I'm not from around—"

"Wait," Sam stopped him mid-sentence. "Velvet?"

He nodded, breaking into a cold sweat.

He didn't know what he expected, but certainly not the two pairs of shocked eyes he got. Puffy's hostility and Sam's suspicion both faded immediately, and they shared a look with open mouths and wide eyes. The dark storm in the sheep's eyes was no more, and the creeper hybrid's rigid shield in front of her was pulled back.

"You're Antfrost's Velvet, aren't you?" he asked him in a whisper.

Velvet felt his heart soar again, and a spark of hope returned. "I am," he agreed, struggling to contain his excitement.

He expected his eagerness to be mirrored by the other two, but he found himself sorely disappointed. Sam and Puffy shared another look, but this time, they didn't turn back to him. Puffy leaned forwards and held her head in her hands, and Sam stared off into the distance, biting his lip. Neither of them said a word.

Velvet's face fell. "What is it?"

Puffy was the first to move, dragging her hands through her hair and giving him a sideways glance. "You picked the worst time to turn up here," she said to him.

"Huh?"

"What she's trying to say," Sam said, taking the lead, "is that things are about to go down tonight, and Antfrost isn't how you remember him."

The last part, Velvet had already somewhat figured. "He hasn't written to me in months," he agreed sadly.

"Velvet, you shouldn't have come," Sam continued. All the coldness had melted into a warmth Velvet hadn't expected to see from him.

"I need to see him," he said, determined once again. "I need to make sure he's alright. Where is he?"

It seemed like Sam wasn't even listening to him, too caught up in trying to push him away. "Get out of here while you can, trust me. You don't want to be here tonight."

Velvet wasn't going to budge. "Where is he?"

"Velvet—"

"Where is Antfrost?" He stood up abruptly, judging the one-sided conversation they were having a waste of time. He didn't even want to ask Sam why he was even there, alive while everyone thought he was dead.

The sudden movement startled the two others, and Puffy ended up gripping Sam's arm tightly. From a menace so eager to attack him on sight, she had since retreated into a much more docile and frightened shell.

"Velvet, please," she bleated, eyes just as surprisingly soft and warm as her partner's. "You don't have to do this. We'll get him to you, but you need to leave this place. Now."

Velvet stayed put, and tugged down the lapels of his suit. "I'm not leaving until I've talked to him," he let them know. "Where is he?"

Another moment passed where no one answered. Eventually, Sam turned his eyes away and looked down. "I think I saw him lingering around the left side—"

"Sam!"

The man ignored Puffy's appalled cry, and instead glanced back at Velvet. "I know what it's like to pine over someone you love and lost," he said softly.

Velvet doubted that he had done so for years on end, with the only contact being letters sent across the brine and arriving days too late. But he listened anyway.

"If you absolutely need to see him, I don't think anyone can stop you. But I'm warning you that Antfrost is not the cat you remember. Go and see him, but then get out as soon as you can. If you're not going to listen to me about Ant, please at least take my warning about tonight."

Velvet nodded without another word, knowing that if he spoke, he'd probably regret what he'd say.

He gave them both a look of thanks, and walked away, bristling at their burning stares on his back. He tried to shut them out, concentrating instead on the long, arduous walk through the crowd in front of him.

Stuffy clouds of perfume wormed their way up his nose, down his throat and into his eyes, making them water. He rushed to veer off to the more open side, leaning against a gargantuan red pillar as he coughed out the sickly sweet remains of someone's toiletries. The orchestra's music pounded in his ears. Everything was too loud, too smelly, too blinding. However, he forced himself to keep his eyes open, searching for a familiar pelt of tan and cream fur.

He didn't know when he started backing away, or what exactly tripped him up.

Velvet stumbled backwards into the bright golden light of the dancefloor, feeling his body plummet towards the shining ground beneath him. He let out a squeak of surprise, reaching out for the pulsating tendrils that curled around the edges and under his feet.

Someone caught him just before he hit his head, and pulled him back up with soft, fluffy hands.

"Well, well! The Egg is very generous with its gifts tonight," a voice purred in amusement, and Velvet froze.

He snapped his head around, facing his savior fully. He couldn't say anything for a long while, simply taking him in from head to toe. It took him a moment for his mind to fully process what he was seeing.

Time changed people, he knew that, but he had never seen the fruits of its labor with his own two eyes.

"A dance?" Antfrost mewed, bowing deeply in front of Velvet.

The soft and bright, featherlight wisps of fur that used to cloud his figure like fluffy candyfloss were now darker and much more rigid, stretched over his decidedly more muscular frame like layers of rich silk. Every aspect of him seemed sharper, more defined, from his muzzle to the tip of his tail. Velvet noticed a couple of scars on his cheek and paws, and one of his ears had definitely seen better days.

But he was still Antfrost. He was here, holding him. He was here.

All thoughts of slapping him into oblivion faded from his mind, overtaken by his heart.

Velvet almost waltzed himself into a daydream, but a soft squeeze to his hand brought him back to reality. He remembered the question, and he finally found his voice to formulate an answer.

"Um, yes."

The cat in front of him stood up straight again, a wide smile curving his facial features. Velvet held in a breath when Ant's eyes focused on him. Far from the bright blue he had always cherished, they were a dark, dangerous shade of red, as red as blood, as red as the suspicious glasses of wine passed around at that very masquerade.

"Antfrost is not the cat you remember."

All of a sudden, for the first time, Velvet didn't feel safe around his lover.

He didn't have the time or the strength to do anything about, however, as Antfrost soon whisked him into a hold and twirled them both into the middle of the dancefloor. The world whizzed by in a glitzy, golden and scarlet blur, and Velvet's head began to throb. It was only when they settled into a more gentle rhythm that he dared take a proper look around.

This time, he wasn't searching for Antfrost: he was looking for *help*. The closest he got to it was spying Sam dancing arm in arm with a black-winged avian in a corner, but he was

too far away to call to without making a scene and Velvet was spun away before he could try to catch his eye.

"I didn't get your name," Ant suddenly said, and Velvet's fear turned to confusion.

His... *name*?

Were they really apart for that long?

"Ant, it's me," Velvet said, furrowing his brow as he tried to decipher his beloved's reaction. Was this some kind of joke?

The cat's whiskers twitched, and he smiled. "Who's 'me'?"

"It's... me." His own name caught in his throat. "Velvet."

"Nice to meet you."

Nice to meet you.

It was a cordial reply, too cordial for someone Velvet had promised himself he'd spend the rest of his life with. He was suddenly pained even more by the reminder that they hadn't even tied the knot yet, the rings on their fingers only temporary links until Antfrost returned to their seaside town.

Velvet glanced at his partner's paw, and upon seeing the silver glint of the ring still there, he allowed himself to relax a little, touched.

And yet, no ring could answer the questions Velvet was currently asking himself. This was Ant, there was no question about it, but why didn't he recognize him? He had a gut feeling that it was due to something much more than distance – perhaps something crimson that had bled between them.

"Forgive me for asking, but have we met before?"

He was aware of Antfrost still watching him, but he averted his eyes. He couldn't bear to look at him again, or rather at whatever was eating at his memories. But the cat clearly expected an answer of some kind. He forced himself to give it.

"I..." His heart sank, and he swallowed down his sorrow. "No, no we haven't."

"That's a shame. You remind me of someone..."

Antfrost held him tight, leading their dance. In any other circumstance, Velvet would have taken the lead and guided his partner. It always used to make him laugh when he did, but all Velvet did that evening was let himself be dragged around like a ragdoll.

He should have been happy: he was back in Antfrost's arms again. He was close to him. He could feel him. He could even lean in and kiss him if he wanted to.

He *couldn't* though, that was the thing.

Antfrost didn't recognize him, and it hurt. It hurt so much, too much. Velvet didn't know why he was still here, still insisting on clinging on to a lover who didn't even know his name anymore.

And yet, I will never give up on you.

Their dance came to a sudden halt, and Antfrost peeled himself away.

"Excuse me," he said, raising a hand up to someone in the distance.

Turning around, Velvet just caught a glimpse of a dark, horned figure beckoning from a huddle of finely dressed guests.

The cat gave them another wave, then looked back at Velvet. He leaned down and kissed his hand. Velvet almost melted into his touch.

"Perhaps we can meet up again, Velvet," Antfrost said with a grin. "I would love to get to know you better."

Velvet nodded silently. Again, all he felt was pain: that wry, flirty smirk was the one Ant had given him, back when they had just met and hadn't gone any further than a simple "*hello*" and teasing threats to call the cops when Ant would try and steal cookies from Velvet's bakery. Back when they were strangers, and had no idea that they would one day plan a long and happy life together.

Velvet had never wanted to go back to those times, before his heart had been full to the brim by an intelligent, soft pelted feline. He couldn't bear to feel it empty again. He couldn't live without Antfrost any longer.

But when Antfrost walked away, leaving Velvet alone in the midst of a sea of unknown, masked faces, a jolt in his stomach were the butterflies once were told him that was exactly what was happening to them.

They were becoming strangers once again, and everything was out of Velvet's control.

Sam's words came back to him. He didn't want to be here tonight. Something was afoot, and the supposedly dead creeper hybrid was trying to warn him about it. He seemed to have some sort of control over everything, the kind of control that Velvet lacked.

He could make a break for it. He could let others handle whatever was going to happen. He didn't have to play the hero, rescuing his amnesiac, red-eyed damsel in distress.

He looked over to the entrance of the cavern. The imposing doors were still open. He could leave and save himself, as Sam had been pushing him to do.

He lingered for a moment.

He pondered.

He waited.

Velvet shook his head.

Sorry, Sam, he apologized silently, turning away from the door, but I can't risk throwing my whole life away because of the words of a stranger.

He followed the wave of guests that began to swarm over to the back of the room, making sure his mask was on and he could slip by somewhat unnoticed.

All the way, he kept his eyes trained on Antfrost, even as he took his place at the head of the magnificent parade, a sore reminder that the cat was now so much more without him.

Chapter Sixty-Two: Blackout

Everything was going to plan.

The soul sand had been spread; no one from his team had been recognized, openly called out or viciously attacked by the Eggpire or any other potential rivals present that night; none of the other guests had questioned their motives of attendance that evening.

Everything was fine.

Technoblade took a deep breath, inhaling the stench of the aristocracy and the fine clothes and scents they bore. He wrinkled his snout in disgust, yet he still held his head high enough to be taken for one of them.

The voices berated him for it, going as far as mocking him and laughing his ears off. The worst part was that Techno couldn't attempt to discipline them with his loud, booming voice and risk drawing unwanted attention to himself – the voices knew that, and were definitely taking advantage of it. All he could do was bear them and their taunts as best he could, like a tired and hopeless parent unable to subdue his toddlers' tantrums.

Technoblade breathed again. In, and out. In, out.

That was fine.

This was fine.

Everything was *fine*.

Everything was going according to plan.

He had overthrown entire monarchies and corrupt governments hundreds of times before, always succeeding with the only casualties being the ones his weapons piled up at his feet. There was no reason for him to be so nervous.

But Techno was, and the feeling was somewhat foreign to him. The Great Technoblade, anxious about taking down a measly Egg and the cowardly empire birthed from its core with a foolproof and carefully constructed plan! It was laughable! He had no reason to be scared in any way: even if no one else had his back, his bloodlust and screaming well of voices definitely would. He could slay the enemy in cold blood without so much as breaking a sweat. He could manage on his own.

And yet, he wasn't alone, not this time. That was the difference between other battles and this one. He had people, warriors, to back him up. But even as he watched them each in turn, dispersed among the moving crowd, he couldn't help but let his worry grow.

Philza was his best friend, and had fought in many wars and skirmishes alongside him. Technoblade knew he was a skilled warrior, especially now he had regained the use of

his wings, and yet multiple of the voices at the back of his mind began to nag at him, reminding him of a harsh reality.

With only a single life left after thousands of years alive and his greatest asset – *his working wings!* – able to be ripped from him with the simple snap of a spring or joint failure, Philza was frailer than he had ever been before. If anything went wrong, anything at all, the avian could very well breathe his last tonight.

The mere thought of a life without Philza by his side, a couple of years' taste of the prospect already offered to him a while back, was unbearable to Technoblade.

How could he promise someone the world if they weren't around to let him give it to them?

Then, there was Ranboo.

Young, sweet Ranboo: always helpful, always too innocent and anxious for his own good, always a spark of joy in Technoblade's bloody existence. Since the Eggpire blackmailing him had led the hybrid to be found frozen out of a life, Techno had made a silent, solemn vow to protect him and his sanity at all costs.

It was Ranboo who had insisted on coming along that night, using his duty to the Syndicate as leverage. Techno would have done everything to prevent him from doing so if his admiration hadn't briefly made him drop his guard – he had ended up caving in to Ranboo's pleas without much of a struggle.

He had only been reminded how dangerous their venture truly was when he had watched the hybrid eagerly pick out masks for their outfits earlier that day, excitedly holding different versions up against himself in the mirror and teasingly up to his companions' faces, acting like a hyperactive child in a toy store.

That only stabbed Technoblade with more guilt, knowing that he was helping drag another youngster into the heat of a dangerous mission. The voices had laughed at him, tutting that the piglin had decidedly not learned his lesson with Tommy.

Nikki was just a couple of people across from Ranboo, her magnificent silver dress setting her apart from everyone else.

Again, Nikki was dear to him, her sudden and surprising presence in the Syndicate growing on him just as quickly as ivy up a tree. Sweet, bubbly, endearing and a brilliant fighter, she was simultaneously everything the Syndicate did and didn't need.

Technoblade had always imagined the Syndicate as being a place full of stone-faced, heavily battle-scarred anarchists with stoic complexions and a body-count so high it could almost touch the heavens themselves. However, Nikki's soft, impeccable behaviour at their sacred, underground table and her tasty baked delights had never ceased to prove him wrong on that fantasy.

Speaking of first appearances and expectations not mattering, Sapnap was the next companion Technoblade's gaze lingered on.

Sapnap had come to them with a predicament, a problem he had wanted to fix – that problem in particular being Kinoko Kingdom and the way they had treated him. At the time, that was what the fireborn had seemed to be: a vengeful soul who wanted his dues paid in full, and who needed the help of powerful warriors to get what he wanted.

It hadn't taken Technoblade long to realize that the wish to overthrow Kinoko once and for all was merely used as a way into the exclusive little commune out in the snowy tundra.

Sapnap had shown him the true beauty of his fire, a different side to the destructive kind that Techno was so accustomed to, and his true self. Cocky, a little rude perhaps, and a heartbroken outcast who needed a raft in his wide ocean of hatred. The piglin had offered him that safe ship without so much as a second thought. He hadn't thought of retracting his hospitality since, too attached to his fiery refugee.

And finally, there were Sam and Captain Puffy.

A brief but old friend Techno had essentially pledged his life to, one that the piglin had saved from a certain, final death. Sam was intelligent, a brilliant engineer, a powerful fighter and hot-headed individual. He was a remarkable addition to the Antarctic Commune, and had grown to become a close, dear friend since.

Technoblade didn't know too much about Puffy: he hadn't seen her fight, he hadn't really spoken to her or looked her way outside of battle, and in all honesty knew her from reputation alone. But if Sam trusted her above even himself – and clearly, he did – so would Technoblade. He began to get to know her, although never as well as he would have liked in their short, recent collaboration. That certainly had made for some nasty, guilt-ridden surprises in the long run...

The moment he had learned that Tubbo was her son was like a brick to his face: a painful, reeling shock.

And then everything began to make sense – and Technoblade meant *everything*.

Even now, just watching Sam and Puffy sharing low-voiced, friendly banter off to the side, Techno couldn't help but smile.

Visibly, all the signs he had noticed had proven to be true, from both ends. He was finished trying to subtly push them together, making comments and giving them both knowing looks whenever he could. One had admitted his feelings outright to him, and that was as far as Technoblade was ready to push. Whatever story chose to unfold next between the two of them was out of his hands.

Come what may.

His smile fell a moment later, the voices refusing to let him forget his worry.

A simple dance had made Sam snap and revealed a frightening jealous streak that the piglin hadn't expected from him. He had turned lovesick, restless, and careless. All the common sense that Techno knew Sam held had been momentarily forgotten, his head overpowered by his heart. His emotions had almost gotten him recognized and destroyed the entire plan.

He was a man so stubbornly ruled by his heart, and Technoblade was the unfortunate one who had to try to babysit him.

If the normally strong and smart Sam was that easy to distract and coerce, then things could go downhill faster than he could have ever imagined. Not only for him, but for Techno's entire team. If Sam, the once-feared Warden of Pandora's Vault, could snap like that, what hope was there for Ranboo? For Nikki? For Sapnap?

No, Technoblade couldn't let anything harm any of them – that's what he was truly worried would happen that night. He wasn't worried about his personal performance, or being slaughtered himself.

He couldn't let anything happen to some of the only people he could consider akin to a family, *his* family.

He was worried for his family.

Suddenly more determined than ever, he focused back on his priorities, and continued to move with the sea of guests. A bell had been rung not too long ago and although nothing was shouted or formally announced, there had been an unanimous

understanding that it was to finally call all the partygoers to the pinnacle of that evening: the banquet itself.

Long tables had been set up on the ridiculously large, previously empty floor plan in front of the Egg, arranged in a "U" formation. The wings were clearly reserved for the large number of guests themselves, while the table at the head was for the higher-ups of the Eggpire, the theory only proven correct by solely red-eyed individuals taking the few seats there. The rest of that evening's company scrambled to find decent spots along the sides.

Technoblade smirked to himself, knowing the inner workings of similar feasts. He had expected such a set-up, and had prepared his team accordingly. Due to Egg-possession-related complications that had arisen, a couple of seats were switched, and the piglin watched slyly as his friends took their respective places.

Puffy and Philza sat at the ends, as far away as possible from the Egg itself – Puffy on the left extremity, Phil on the right.

Nikki and Ranboo took seats as close as they could to the head of the table, again with one on the left side and one on the right.

Finally, scattered in the middle of infected and uninfected guests alike, Techno, Sapnap and Sam took a chair wherever they could. Techno sat on the left wing, and the two others on the right, Sapnap strategically choosing a seat facing Sam to potentially ward off any unwanted stares and questions, for the both of them.

Even their spaced-out seating arrangements had been a part of their carefully constructed plan: it was a way to surround their enemies as best they could, leaving them no escape.

That was a technique Techno had developed after re-reading "The Art Of War" for the millionth time – and faced with Ranboo's student-like awe when the piglin had first told them all the plan in detail, Techno hadn't resisted ribbing the hybrid a little, a humorous "I told you so" to keep the mood light between them all.

And as with all the battle plans and techniques Sun Tzu inspired, Technoblade had a strong suspicion that it would end up paying off in the end.

He sat down, wincing and trying to ignore as his chair creaked under his weight. He instead turned his attention to the heavily laden table in front of him.

Laid out across a thin white tablecloth, arrays of different trays and plates were piled high with all the rich, stodgy delicacies one could ever dream of. There were high stacks of roast, spiced meats dripping with velvet gravy; soft, creamy desserts Technoblade had never even seen before; every kind of sautéed vegetable; cheese; cornucopias of fresh fruit; and containers of thick cream. Ornate, gold-plated jugs overflowed with the same, rich red wine that had been passed around all evening. Raised on twisting branches of gold, candles burned with bright orange flames, dripping their searing wax onto the delicious-looking world underneath.

Technoblade heard his stomach growl, but resisted the temptation to so much as take a lick of anything. Seeing Puffy in the state she had been in after only a sip of wine had only confirmed the piglin's suspicions about the dangers of the catering, and he had strongly forbidden his friends to touch a single crumb or drop.

His stomach continued to protest loudly, only getting worse once some of the guests around him began to dig in.

"Well, this is truly about turning over a new leaf, isn't it?" a deep voice next to him hummed.

Technoblade looked over, then immediately corrected his nervous posture back to his powerful, muscular frame. Just because he was worried about his friends didn't mean that he had to lose his reputation in the process.

He narrowed his eyes and sighed. Of *course* the gods had made him sit next to the reigning monarch of the Greater SMP...

Eret leaned back against the high, cushioned back of his seat, his rich red dress draped elegantly over his drawn-up knee. He leaned in towards Technoblade, his smile nothing but warm and friendly. There was no fear in his movements or the way he addressed the piglin – it was a foolish show of trust, some might say.

"An anarchist and a king, sitting next to each other without a single blade or drop of blood in sight."

Techno shifted uncomfortably, and replied with only a doubtful hum. The voices began to clamour, begging him to be satiated by a gory display of violence. King Eret was the closest target, and they clearly wanted his head.

But Technoblade was not insane. He was bloodthirsty, yes, but not insane or mindless by any means. He had no reason to attack a monarch who hadn't done anything heinous.

Anyway, wasn't it Eret that had tried to warn him about the "dangerous" arsonist that might have gone to attack Technoblade? He had no reason to be concerned about the Antarctic Commune, and yet he still had the decency to send a warning through Ranboo.

Before being king, Eret was human, and a good one at that. That was something Technoblade kept forgetting when faced with leaders of any kind – then again, not many of them acted as such, and their actions reflected it even less.

The piglin leaned towards him. "Your Majesty," he whispered in a low voice, "I would recommend not touching anything."

He watched his reaction carefully. Eret's smile briefly faltered, and he withdrew his hands from the table.

"I had my own suspicions," he whispered back with a nod. "It's nice to know that they're shared."

"Well, they are. I don't trust the Eggpire."

"I didn't expect you to willingly save my life though."

"You might think that I'm out to get all the ruling powers," said Technoblade, "but that's not true. I only topple the ones that deserve it."

He couldn't help but notice the smile Eret was trying so hard to hide. "You don't think I deserve to be overthrown?"

The king clearly wasn't taking the piglin's comment to heart, and Techno respected that. He allowed himself a small grin as well, and a chuckle.

"Not yet," he smirked. "Try asking me that question a couple of months down the line."

The question couldn't be put off any longer.

"Are you alright?"

Sapnap seemed surprised at being addressed, and he looked back. Sam waited for his reply, giving him soft eyes that assured the fireborn that he was here for him.

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Sapnap dismissively shrugged and flicked his fingers in the air. Sitting askew in his chair, he looked relaxed, or at least tried to be.

Sam wasn't going to fall for that. He decided to be blunt. "You look like a lovesick dog," he said.

"And *you* look like you've hit the romance jackpot, Daedalus," the other replied with a snort. "I never thought you'd be the type to go for someone small and soft."

Sam ignored the embarrassment rising within him, and raised an eyebrow. "Really, how come?"

"Everything about you is just so... big! From that stupid prison to your redstone shit – heck, have you seen how tall you are?! You'll crush her if you're not careful!"

Sam laughed, then lowered his voice. "Is it that obvious?" he asked in a murmur.

Sapnap thought for a moment. "Nah," he said, "it isn't, but I've known you long enough to pick out these sorts of things. I can tell you're smitten with her."

"And is that a good or bad thing?"

"If she makes you happy, go for it. Everyone deserves a happy ending at some point."

All of a sudden, Sapnap's teasing faltered, his face falling and a dark storm brewing in his eyes. He craned his body back over the edge of his chair, once again cut off from the world. Sam frowned. He followed the other's gaze, peeking over a sea of heads until his eyes landed on the far edge of the left wing.

For a moment, he almost cracked a smile, his heart swelling as the back of a familiar figure caught his eye, but he soon realized that Sapnap's gaze was elsewhere, just opposite, and focused on another guest Sam hadn't noticed that evening.

Kinoko Kingdom had been a pretty quiet and reserved nation, staying out of most conflicts and quietly living their own life in their little wooded valley. The biggest thing that happened to them, as far as he could recall, was when Sapnap burned the place down.

Sam had met Karl Jacobs only once – when a heated argument had broken out during a diplomatic meeting in Las Nevadas between Kinoko's leader and Quackity – but he immediately recognized him as soon as he laid eyes on him, there and then.

Karl was sitting up straight in his seat, fingers nervously tapping the table in front of him. Thankfully, it didn't seem like he was ingesting anything, but the eyes behind his mask were wide and haunted, vacant. In front of him, Puffy was clearly trying to initiate some sort of conversation, but the leader didn't respond. All his attention was focused on the right line of tables Sam and Sapnap were sitting on.

Sam immediately ducked his head down and averted his gaze, desperately trying to avoid being in the limelight, but his fireborn friend didn't budge; he just kept watching the other.

Sam was right about his friend acting strange, although perhaps the term lovesick was an understatement in that situation.

Karl and Sapnap's staring contest never developed beyond just that: a staring contest. There were no cries, no gestures, loving or hateful, just two men as stubborn as each other locking eyes from across a crimson banquet, immobile.

He wanted to say something, anything at all to comfort his friend, but he soon realized it would amount to nothing. Either he would end up blurting out something that would make his friend angry, or his words would fall on deaf ears. He'd be wasting his breath if he even tried.

Instead, he turned his eyes to the empty plate in front of him, and then to the food and drink laid out across the entire length of the table. He narrowed his eyes, gripping the edge of his seat to ground himself, resisting the urge to leap up and knock everything to the floor.

He couldn't cause a scene: he had almost done so already that evening by deliberately disregarding Technoblade's warnings and advice. That single dance with Puffy, in full view of everything and everyone, could have signed his death warrant.

Then again, looking back on that blissful moment between the two of them, he still wouldn't have traded it for the world.

He cast careful looks up and down the rest of his long, long table, watching what everyone else was doing.

The orchestra continued to play on their stand, their music sounding so far away. Dishes and beverages were still being brought in and laid out by the waiters that had previously been skulking around the edges of the cavern, and a few of the platters were already running empty. There had been no official beginning of the feast announced

yet, but some guests had already started eating and drinking. Others sat with their hands in their laps, patiently waiting for a sign to commence while conversing with their neighbours or eyeing the food piled high on their plates.

Sam looked down the line until he caught Philza's gaze. The avian was sitting far away from the Egg, at the end of the table, but he wasn't hard to miss with his large wings peeking over the crowd. He turned a little, giving Sam a smile before continuing to serve himself.

Dread began to pool in Sam's stomach and he stared at Phil intently, ready to step in if the Egg decided to somehow consume him again. Philza, however, seemed to have taken the multiple warnings from Puffy's state, Techno's words and Sapnap's fist to heart, leaning back into his chair without another word once he had filled his dish. Sam didn't see him touch anything else, and that reassured him.

He looked down at his own empty plate, the pristine white and gold porcelain standing out drastically against the other platters brimming with nourishment galore – perhaps a little too much to keep his presence discreet.

So, like everyone around him, he began to fill the white void in front of him, taking random portions of whatever he could reach. It wasn't like he'd be eating any of it anyways and in all honesty, he was happy to finally get his hands busy doing something to try and distract him from his growing nerves.

For a while, everything went smoothly and Sam could slowly lean into his role as another hungry, unsuspecting guest. That was until he reached for a piece of bread, and accidentally brushed someone's hand.

"Excuse me," he said without thinking, withdrawing his own hand politely. He only realized his mindless mistake a moment later, when a voice right next to him called his name.

"Sam? Is that you?"

He froze in sudden fear, a chill running up his spine. Trying to stay composed, he glanced at the person sitting to the left of him.

It took him a moment to recognize her, but when he did, he allowed himself to breathe a little freer.

"Hannah?" he whispered.

The flower nymph gave him a small nod. "The roses told me you were alive," she said, her smile bright and knowing.

Sam took one look at her, and felt another anxious boulder form in his stomach.

Of all the nymphs that graced the mossy ground of the Badlands' numerous forests, Hannah was undoubtedly the friendliest, and the most confident. She was the one who'd follow unsuspecting walkers and teasingly blow flurries of rose petals into their hair, or sit on tree stumps and eagerly watch them work while singing or rambling on about the latest gossip among her faerie folk. Perhaps a little more devilish than some of her fellow nymphs, her "pranks" often consisted of growing magnificent rose bushes in less-than convenient places, and giggling when someone tried to figure out where the heck the growths had even come from.

She had even been one of the only faeries to have ventured beyond her forest and into the rest of the Badlands' moor-like territory, playing hide-and-seek with the rabbits among the heather or fraternizing with the herds of wild deer that pranced over the hills.

Once or twice, after her sweet-smelling, almost childlike insistence had finally made him crack, Sam had taken her on long horse rides to the mines and the coastline. Her loud whoops of delight were music to his ears as they'd ride bareback across the waterfront, Hannah clinging onto his armour or cape and fluttering her dainty little wings against the salty sea air.

Sam hadn't seen her in ages. Originally, he had thought that she had decided to stay among the trees with the other nymphs – perhaps she had been grounded for her wild escapades into the unknown or her practical, rose-scented jokes.

Yet now, finally seeing her for the first time in months, he got a real answer, and it wasn't a nice one.

Hannah had always been a bright and colourful girl, always decked out in soft tulle dresses of light pink and hugged tightly by the lush green thorns and blood-red roses that curled over most of her body. Bouncy, tight curls of dark brown hair always tangled with petals, twigs and leaves used to grace her shoulders, and paper-thin, delicate wings would flutter impossibly fast, always keeping her hovering mere inches off the floor.

She was such a recognizable individual, normally, but now it had taken Sam a while to finally realize who she was.

She had changed so much. Her bright pink frock had been swapped out for a long, unremarkable dress of pure white, as if its colour had been sucked out of it with a straw, and her hair had sagged, turning her curls into long, straight locks that reached her waist. The petals and forest treasures that used to adorn them had disappeared. Her skin was pale, too pale for the flower nymph to be considered healthy and well, and dark bags circled crimson eyes from behind a mask made of scarlet vines and thorns, sharp and unsettling as they bore into Sam's soul. Her wings were bound behind her back by crimson, thorned restraints, now merely tattered rags that would lift her no longer.

Finally, Hannah's once magnificent, soft roses were anything but alive. Dark, rotting petals hung limply from stiff, dried up strands of briar, still clinging on to the nymph they had died on. If they had indeed talked to her about Sam's survival, then that must have been the last thing they had done. The sweetness of the flowers had become sickly and nauseous, reeking of month-old decay.

Sam hurried to look away, ignoring the jeering hisses in his ears and instead focusing on the thunder growling in his mind. It didn't take a genius to know what had happened to Hannah, and who was the culprit.

His hate towards the Egg only grew, as did the disappointment at himself.

"Did you want that piece of bread?" Hannah asked him, her voice the only thing unchanged between then and now. It was bittersweet.

Sam said nothing, shaking his head and not even daring to look at her lest he be reminded that he had failed someone else, once again.

He instead turned his full attention back to Sapnap, who had since dragged his eyes away from Karl and had instead sunk into his seat. His eyes were still veiled by a thin film of frustration – the kind that only came with heartbreak and lovesickness – but had started to focus a lot more on his present surroundings. Eventually, they landed on a jug of wine, and the empty glass standing to attention next to his plate.

"Fuck this," he growled, and before Sam could say anything, he had poured himself a hefty glass and had started to bring it up to his mouth, ready to down the load in one fell swoop.

Sam's arm shot out to stop him just before the rim touched Sapnap's lips, and eventually managed to wrestle the glass out of the other's hands, not without spilling a drop or two on the white tablecloth.

"Don't be an idiot," Sam warned with a hiss, slamming the glass down beside his own plate.

The stare he got in response was downright spiteful. "Don't pretend alcohol doesn't numb this sort of pain," the fireborn muttered.

Sam's hand closed around his friend's, no longer brutal but reassuring. "But that's not alcohol," he whispered, "is it? We both know that poison is off limits."

Sapnap stared at him defiantly for a minute more, then seemingly resigned himself. He slipped his heated hand out of Sam's grasp and leaned back, crossing his arms in front of his chest and sighing deeply.

"Still," he grumbled in a voice so low, Sam had to strain himself to catch it all. "It's better than nothing..."

Again, Sam wished that he had some words of comfort for the fireborn, and again the potential fountain of words ran dry.

Fortunately, their conversation was broken up by the loud and chiming sound of a knife tapping the side of a glass. Almost in unison, all heads were turned towards the Egg, and the high table that sat before it. The band screeched to a halt, setting down their bows and fingers.

It was surprising how such a small sound could break every animated discussion, hush an entire army's worth of people and stop time itself in its tracks.

But it certainly worked.

Bad grinned, momentarily soaking up all the attention now focused on himself, and spoke.

"My friends," he began, his arms outstretched in a friendly manner, grinning widely, "thank you for coming to the Red Banquet!"

His expression of gratitude was met with a rumble of applause, none more thunderous than the clapping of his own, dear members of the Eggpire. Quite a few had decided to attend tonight, to his delight. Their devotion to the Egg was clearly exemplary.

The demon continued. "Whether you were explicitly invited—"

He turned to some of the more well-dressed guests: those who had clearly made an effort to be presentable and the numerous leaders of the surrounding nations.

"—or if you were simply enticed among us tonight by the smell of free drink—"

He glanced over to some of the guests that clearly had a little less decorum and money, earning a shared laugh from a few.

"—we welcome you to our quaint little party. I hope the evening has been satisfactory so far."

The gleeful and delighted murmurs he got from the gaggle of guests let him know that it was much more than "satisfactory". He smiled again, proud of his own work.

He raised his hand for silence, which he got almost immediately. For a moment, he paused, again soaking up the attention. His open hand balled into a fist, and he took a deep breath. He held so much control over them all: he could probably snap his fingers and they'd all stand to attention and salute him like a general. He was tempted to try it, just for fun.

The Egg had promised him the gathering's full attention that night, and Bad hadn't questioned it. He didn't want power or control – he was just doing all of this to reverse a terrible, terrible mistake – but now he had a taste of it, he indulged himself a little.

At least, he wanted to, however the Egg had other plans, soft but dangerous hisses urging him to continue.

He couldn't disobey them, not now he was so close to his own, personal victory.

"Now, I have a long and lengthy speech prepared," he admitted to the hundreds of pairs of eyes watching him intently, "but I am not the only one here worthy of such an audience to hear what I have to say."

Bad sat down in his chair, and raised a glass towards the left side.

"King Eret," he announced grandly, purposely pushing the monarch into the spotlight, "would you like to say a few words?"

He took a sip of his wine as he watched the king stand up. Eret was always a tall person in general, but tonight with his head held high and his magnificent robes dripping with gold cloaking his figure, he looked even grander, absolutely owning the room and his presence.

A true ruler, Bad had to admit. He just hoped Eret would treat the moment as if it was his last in power – there was a strong likelihood that it would be.

"As the monarch of the Greater SMP," Eret began, the crown on top of his head shimmering splendidly, "I would just like to say that it is amazing to have us all here today, sharing dances and meals without being defined by our mistakes and the tensions between our nations. I hope this can be a new chapter for us all, and that peace will be here to stay." He raised his glass. "Cheers to that."

Loud cries of "Here, here!" and echoes of "Cheers!" rippled throughout the cavern, along with a couple of polite claps. A few attendees clinked their glasses together and took a sip.

Bad followed their lead, acting as an example for others. Only his Eggpire companions seemed to take the hint, and he pursed his lips, trying to suppress his frustration.

Visibly, King Eret was much more popular than that evening's hosts. The demon had no idea whether that would be a help or a hindrance in the long run.

The king sat down again, and put his glass down in front of him. Bad took note of the fact that he didn't drink any of it.

Trying to mask his growing irritation, he searched the crowd for another worthy speaker. He finally set eyes on one at the far end of a table, opposite Captain Puffy. He gestured to him. "Karl?"

Kinko Kingdom's leader snapped his head up, visibly startled and blinking as if he had just been awoken from a daydream. Then, after nervously glancing at all the expecting eyes turned towards him, stood up. The legs of his chair painfully squealed across the polished wooden floor and cut through the silence, making more than one guest wince. Compared to the previous speaker, Karl's figure seemed minuscule: not only was he seated much farther away from everyone else, he seemed downright terrified by something.

Unlike Eret, who had adhered to the Red Banquet's colour code like almost all the other guests, Karl Jacobs' evening wear was a mismatched amalgamation of green and magenta silks, fashioned into a gleaming suit that seemed to be woven from starlight itself.

Bad knew it was most likely a product of Kinoko's silkworms, but tonight was too fantastic an evening to focus on the reality of some things.

"Umm..."

Not the most thrilling start to a leader's speech, Bad had to admit.

"I just hope that this masquerade..."

Karl trailed off, and looked once more at all the masked faces turned towards him. The demon watched as his gaze seemed to linger in particular spots among the crowd for perhaps a little longer than he should have, before his eyes finally landed on the large, shiny crimson mass sitting behind the head of the table.

There was something in his faraway gaze that Bad couldn't quite comprehend, and he almost decided to ask the Egg a couple of discreet questions in hopes of getting an answer. Karl Jacobs' eyes were veiled with some sort of horrified recognition, as if he was faced with a *déjà-vu* that brought back awful memories.

Perhaps the child-soldiers scampering around the lands like rats weren't the only ones with some trauma to unpack.

All of a sudden, Karl seemed to snap back to reality, breezily waving his hand as if he was trying to disregard his previous stutters.

"I'm sorry, let me start again," he implored, and Bad allowed him to with a nod. Finally, Kinoko Kingdom's leader seemed to live up to his position, with a straight back, a high head and a wise stare. "Like King Eret, I hope that the future interactions between our realms will be smooth. We mustn't make the same mistakes as we have done in the past."

He was definitely referring to mistakes he had witnessed himself, that Bad understood from his tone of voice. Then again, hadn't they all made and witnessed the consequences of mindless errors now and then?

"Thank you, Karl."

The clapping subdued, and Bad's eyes scanned the gathering again. They didn't have to search for long, spying a sly, crooked smirk peeping out of the crowd, attached to a scarred face he recognized all too well.

Bad sighed, then gave Quackity permission to talk with a simple wave of his hand.

The leader of Las Nevadas practically leapt out of his seat, tugging at his navy blue suit and grinning widely at his audience.

"All I have to say is that this ball is truly magnificent," he said, flashing the torn part of his face and his golden replacement teeth for all to see. "I love what you've done to the place, Bad, I really do. Tonight has been a prosperous night for Las Nevadas, and I hope it has been for others too..."

The starting words of "All I have to say" was an understatement: from that point on, Quackity didn't sound like he'd stop, clearly taking advantage of his moment to drone on and on. It took Bad about a moment to realize that Big Q must have missed the politically-inclined attention he had been so used to as the Vice-president of Manberg, and consequently as an important figure in L'Manberg's revival afterwards. There was no real harm, so the demon allowed him to continue with his ramblings, chock-a-block full of shameless promotion of his gambling-oriented nation, pearly white smiles, and long, convoluted quotes and sentences Bad didn't even want to try and understand.

Sweet muffin... He rolled his eyes, hoping his mask would hide it.

He sat back in his seat, took a long, dragging sip of his wine, and observed the rest of the crowd, searching for two figures in particular. When he couldn't spot them, he frowned, and glanced at the figure in the chair next to him.

"I don't see anyone from the Temple or the Snowchester," he noted in a low voice that very obviously betrayed his bitterness.

Next to him, Antfrost turned his scarlet attention away from Quackity, and leaned in towards the demon. "Foolish cancelled just this morning," he purred softly, "and, well, we didn't get a reply from Tubbo."

Bad resisted the urge to hit the table, his rage starting to get harder and harder to contain. Everything was going perfectly that evening, but the few inconveniences were a few inconveniences too many. Bad had worked so hard for all of this, and he couldn't let it all crumble just because of some lazy god or a stupid, teenage ram. He couldn't let his future – and Skeppy's too, more than anything – fall into jeopardy again, not after the many sacrifices and sleepless nights that all led up to the banquet.

Bad drummed his fingers against the tablecloth, his stare hardening. "That's alright," he pushed out, desperately trying to find some solace in his own words. "Once tonight is over, we'll be powerful enough to confront them ourselves, and then no one will dare cancel or ignore our invites ever again."

He looked out over the crowd again, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement as he watched the guests still hanging on to Quackity's every word. It was remarkable how

focused and attentive they all were – it was like they were listening to the gospel words of a god or a prophet, and not some self-promotion from a notable charlatan someone had decided to make a politician one day.

Bad stifled a laugh, instead lazily propping his head up on his hand and combing through the crowd. He began to silently pick out the attendees with surprising, fashionable clothes and jewelry that he wouldn't mind owning himself, or even just taking note of familiar faces dotted around here and there.

It was only when he let his eyes wander more intricately across the right side of the room that he froze. Out of all the guests present, only one pair of eyes was not laid on Quackity. Instead, they were clearly ignoring everything he was saying, instead focused on something else – someone else.

Him, they were focused on *him*.

Bad sucked in a breath, his own eyes growing wide and shocked. He raised his head from his hand, his thumping heart giving him all the adrenaline he needed to remain awake and alert – the terror of what he was seeing spiked him upright.

The cold eyes of judgment. They were there, identical to those of the imperfect portrait hanging in the White Mansion, only this time, they were real. Even partially hidden behind a mask of death, the pupils glinted, very much present.

And they were supposed to be *dead*.

Bad abruptly leapt up from his seat, but still just discreet enough to only disturb the two people at his side.

"Quit it, Bad," Punz snarled, "I'm trying to listen."

Bad's mouth was dry, almost too dry to speak. "Which one of you decided to do this?"

The mercenary by his side sounded confused. Irritated, yes, but also puzzled. "Do what?"

Bad couldn't stop staring at the faraway figure, the guilty memory that had finally made a full appearance.

The demon addressed it directly. "You can't say I did it..." he stammered quietly, his plea of innocence akin to the softness of a prayer. "I never even touched you... It was Dream, it was Dream..."

His hand went to grip his stomach, where he felt something sharp impale him. He could almost feel the warm blood trickle down his fingers, his Egg-filled mind playing vile tricks on him. While attempting to steady himself on the table, he knocked over his glass, alerting a few more people surrounding him. He didn't dare cross their gaze, fearing that once he did, the image of his guilt would only get closer, ready to swallow him whole.

"Ant, I don't think Bad's feeling well." Punz's voice barely registered in his brain.

A quiet, commanding hiss echoed somewhere to Bad's right. "Sit down, Punz, or you'll draw attention to us. Don't worry about Bad, he... sometimes spaces out like this."

The demon knew that was a lie. It was a lie, but Antfrost told it anyway, in an obvious effort to save Bad some embarrassment. Little did the cat know, humiliation was the last thing on his mind there and then.

"What?"

"It's a demon thing, Punz."

"He looks terrified—"

"Just let it go," Ant spat, and Bad was suddenly yanked back down into his seat by his sleeve. Whisker tips ghosted over his pointed ear, and a throaty growl punctuated the next words to come out of the cat's muzzle. "Are you a leader?"

The cold eyes continued to watch him, picking his very soul apart. Bad was a leader, and yet so was the phantom staring him down.

He found his voice again, somewhat, although again it went no louder than a murmur. "Yes, and a brave one at that, because I dare to look upon a sight that would terrify the gods themselves."

"What are you talking about?"

Bad raised a shaking finger raising it over the flaming candelabra in front of him. "There... over there..."

He pointed to the green ghost drowned in the sea of seated guests, yet still easily set apart, at least to Bad.

In the old days of L'Manberg, back before international laws made the SMP somewhat civilized, blood was often shed. Since then too, murders and wars too terrible to describe had been committed. It used to be that once a man's brains were dashed out – or rather once a trident was plunged into his stomach – he was dead, and that was the end. But now the dead appeared to rise again, even after bleeding out abundantly in a prison, and took a seat at their own banquets!

If graves and tombs, including one as inescapable as Pandora's Vault, could send the dead back, then why bother burying them anywhere but in the stomachs of vultures?

Bad risked a look away, now focused on Antfrost's own reaction. The cat leaned forwards a little, following the demon's outstretched finger and squinting until his eyes were nothing but two, red slits in his face.

He chuckled. "I didn't realize you were so anxious about tonight," Ant mewled lightly, and Bad's stomach dropped even more. "There's nothing there, Bad, except for guests, your guests. Act like a proper host instead of scaring them all to death with wide eyes over nothing."

Bad stared at his friend, taken aback. "What do you mean, 'nothing'?" he stammered.

"Exactly what I mean," the cat replied, taking a drink, "there's nothing there."

The demon stared at him for a moment longer. The Egg had clearly made Antfrost blind to everything and everyone around them. That was, unless...

Bad looked back at his assembled guests. The phantom was gone. He searched for him, for his tall shadow lurking between the Egg's nearby tendrils or his blackened eyes piercing through him from another corner of the table. He saw nothing.

It would have rendered anyone else terrified, cold shivers running up their spines as they realized that the ghost could be anywhere. But Bad couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief, relaxing back into his seat and silently applauding his mind for finally leaving him in peace.

He almost burst out laughing at himself and his previous fear, at the ridiculousness of his horror. A twisted mind had played tricks on him yet again, that was all.

He ignored the now-empty spot at the table as best he could.

At that moment, Quackity finally stopped speaking, and Bad joined in with the applause that followed – despite not having caught a single word of any of it.

"Thank you, Quackity!" he exclaimed, easing back into his role as host and powerful leader. He looked over at the evening's next speaker. "Technoblade, would you like to say a few words?"

The piglin's head snapped towards him, eyes narrowed behind his black and gold mask. He was scrutinizing the demon, obviously searching him and his sentence for any suspicious undertones. Bad puffed up his chest and brightened his smile, giving him none to find.

"Why me?" Techno asked.

Bad forced out a chuckle, unable and unwilling to deal with any more drama that night. "Well, I think the Antarctic Commune should raise a toast as well," he replied.

"The Commune has no leader," Techno said back, but stood up anyway. He raised a glass that Bad soon noticed from afar was empty. "On behalf of all my fellow comrades, I hope lessons have been learned, from all of you."

He sat down again, and the room devolved into hushed whispers. Such a simple sentence, and yet one that held such a threat in both its words and the tone that delivered it. Even Bad shifted uncomfortably – at his side, there was a soft hiss from Ant and a curse word too heinous to repeat from Punz.

Maybe inviting Technoblade hadn't been the best move – for their safety, at least.

"Thank you," Bad uttered with some difficulty, and stood up again.

Once again owning the room, he took a moment to look out over the only part of his empire that mattered that evening. Everything would end tonight and Bad suddenly felt a burst of adrenaline rush through his veins.

He cast ghosts, guilt, anxiety, anger and the past aside, his focus solely on his next words, themselves carrying only promises for the future.

The Egg *never* broke promises.

Bad began. "I would just like to say again that I appreciate you all coming tonight..."

"What happened?" Tubbo asked, short of breath.

Tommy shook his head, as dumbfounded as him. "I..." He gulped. "I don't know..."

The land stretching out before them was unrecognizable and for a brief moment, Tommy wondered if they weren't still in the Nether – everything was so... *red*.

Spiked and gnarled tendrils of different sizes layered every surface, from the buildings to the trees, floor to the sparkling night sky above. Crimson thorns, roots, flowers and vines spread like an infection for as far as his eye could see, and most likely beyond that horizon as well.

Neither Tommy nor Tubbo dared move, grounded by the shock that had settled in.

"It wasn't like this when I left it," Tommy said aloud, dread beginning to settle in.

In fact, he hadn't so much as seen any of the Egg's shitty growths for the longest time. It could have been because he had decided to spend most of his days in his and Tubbo's secluded treehouse, but even then, he hadn't noticed any tendrils when he did make his occasional trip back into civilization. He hadn't seen the colour red for weeks, save for a few, pathside flowers, his shirt and the small cuts on his hands and arms from his rough activities.

Despite his and Sam Nook's better judgment, he reached out to touch the nearest growth. The bright orange flower pulsed under his touch, spitting out a cloud of dust-like spores into the air. Immediately, Tommy coughed and pushed Tubbo away from it.

"I don't like this," Tubbo said, saying what they were undoubtedly all thinking.

"I don't either," Tommy agreed.

Sam Nook scampered up his arm and perched on his shoulder, letting out a small growl and snapping his jaws when a glowing spore drifted just a little too close to him.

They remained silent and still, unsure of what to do.

"We could go back to Snowchester," Tommy suggested in a whisper, just in case the Egg could hear them and decided to be a bitch.

He also hated to admit it, but he wanted nothing more than to return to the tundra. Anything but staying here, and he knew Tubbo well enough to know that he felt the same way, deep down.

The name "Snowchester" had never sounded so sweet to his ears.

When Tubbo didn't reply, Tommy wasted no time in turning heels and attempting to drag him back through the Nether portal. To his surprise, the young ram stood his ground, and Tommy stumbled.

"Tubbo?" He shook his arm, trying to catch his attention. "Let's get out of here! What's wrong?"

Tommy leaned in, following Tubbo's gaze as it panned across the landscape. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and the stiffness in his body told the boy that there was more to his friend's state than simple shock. He was proved right only a moment later.

"No, no... Tommy, we can't leave."

"What?" Tommy spluttered. "Of course we can!"

"No, you don't understand!" Tubbo spun around, abruptly yanking Tommy towards him. "We *can't* leave! Ranboo and Puffy said they were going to the mainland tonight! They could be in danger!"

Part of Tommy's remaining contempt towards the enderman hybrid still stood, but at the mention of Puffy, the boy softened. And in that moment, his softness grew to concern. Deep concern, that also spread towards thoughts of Ranboo whether the boy wanted it to or not.

"Shit," he muttered, "that's not good..."

"You're telling me!" Tubbo exclaimed, but he calmed down just as quickly. "I mean, there is a chance that they're safe and far away from all this, but—"

The ram fell silent, his grip tightening on Tommy's arms. The boy bit his tongue to not cry out in pain. He would never cease to be impressed by the amount of force Tubbo held in his small body: what he lacked in height, he certainly made up for in strength.

"The Red Banquet," Tubbo suddenly whispered, looking to the side. His face was hard and stern, eyebrows pinched and his eyes ablaze.

Tommy didn't understand what the fuck he was on about. "The... what?"

"We need to see what's going on," Tubbo said, releasing the grip of his arms and instead crushing Tommy's hand.

He pulled him away from the portal, away from the last shred of safety they could hope to find, and dragged him into the treacherous jungle that was once the Greater SMP.

"I think this is the perfect opportunity for us as allies, as a community, to come together and let bygones be bygones. There have been certain... bumps between us along the way, but we've all persevered regardless."

Do it for Skeppy, Bad. Do it for him.

The demon no longer knew if it was his own ecstatic thoughts or the Egg's own voice egging him on, but either way it was pulling the words of his well-rehearsed speech from his mouth and presenting them to the glimmering gathering sat before him.

One speech. One speech and one masquerade, that was all the Egg had wanted him to prepare. It said it would deal with the rest, and that all his good little disciples had to do was sit back and watch everything unfold.

Bad knew exactly what that "everything" was, and for a moment, he stumbled on his words, a thorn of worry embedding itself into his chest.

He hoped none of the threats would come true that night, for everyone's sake.

He took a deep breath, and continued.

"Tubbo, what the fuck do you mean by "the Red Banquet"?"

They could barely see the wood of the paths, layers of stiff crimson briar crunching underfoot.

Tubbo stiffened at his friend's accusing tone, but replied nonetheless.

"The Eggpire sent out invitations to a masquerade ball they're throwing," he explained. "They called it the Red Banquet, and it's supposedly a peaceful gathering focused on apologizing for everything they and the Egg have done."

"How come I've never heard of it, but you have?"

Tubbo paused again, and then in a low voice, "I got an invite."

He didn't even need to look at Tommy to know what expression he had plastered on his face.

"Please don't tell me you were fucking dumb enough to accept it!"

Tubbo spun around, giving him a glare. "You think I'd be that stupid? Of course I didn't! Why else do you think I'm here with you?"

His last sentence came out a little harsher than he had originally intended it, but his best friend didn't make a comment, instead turning his gaze up to the red tendrils draping the Community House junction as they walked in through the eastern arch. The green vines and moss that grew between the bricks had been all but swallowed by scarlet thorns and bright orange fly-traps. Tubbo could feel the new mess of plants watching him, and he shuddered.

He had met the Egg once, when Tommy decided to drag him on another less-than-legal adventure, this time down into the cavern it resided in. Tubbo wasn't ashamed to say that the whole experience had made him cry, and they had barely escaped Bad and Antfrost's slashing blades and claws.

Turns out, Sam Nook had arrived at the right time to distract and defend the boys, soon followed by Sam himself who escorted them out of the cave and berated them for taking such risks all while essentially trespassing on the Badlands' territory with malicious intent.

It had ended with a small row between a gentle, caring Sam and an angry Tommy who was vocally sick of being treated like a little kid, before a loud sob from Tubbo had immediately reconciled them over the young ram's state, and they spent the rest of that day focused solely on pampering him and making sure he was alright.

"*Holy shit*— Tubbo!"

Hearing Tommy's cry of shock, Tubbo wasted no time in rushing over to the southern arch. The same crimson landscape spread before them, but drifted upwards in a wave, crawling up the high stone ramparts of the Greater SMP's castle.

Tubbo's ears flattened against his head. He had never seen the infection so bad before.

"Why are there no guards?" Tommy suddenly asked him, and Tubbo's worry only grew.

"I don't know..."

He pushed back the thoughts of mangled soldiers crushed and suffocated in the pulsating grasp of the Egg.

"Why is it so silent?"

"I don't know..."

"I remember when these lands were uninhabited, when there were only a few villages spaced far out. I built a life here with seven, close friends. Today, that number has dwindled tragically, and political animosity was what pulled up the divides between us all. L'Manberg's revolution started that darker side to our life here in the SMP, bringing about a culture built on warfare and bloodshed. But even so, the nations remaining and prospering here today have clearly shown that they are more powerful, cautious and grand than many others, and I think that's something important to note. We are all powerful in our own, respective corners of the land, but united together, we could rule the universe – metaphorically, of course."

"How could Eret let this happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, the guy preferred to rule over this shithole than stay loyal to L'Manberg, so he must be taking fucking good care of it. Why is no one out to investigate?"

Tubbo looked up at the sky. "It's late. They must be sleeping—"

He looked over at a few houses lining the Prime Path, their doors and windows barricaded by monstrous red growths, "—or trapped."

He thought briefly of the invite he had received a while back, and dread began to settle in again. "Or distracted by the Red Banquet... Those Eggpire freaks planned this all along, didn't they?"

Tommy's silence was all the confirmation Tubbo needed to throw his head back and groan.

Not again. He couldn't go through another war, not now he had just got his life back in order. Not now the night terrors had started to cease. Not now he almost forgot his scars were there. Not now Tommy was back beside him, safe and alive.

His worry began to spread beyond just himself. He thought of Snowchester, and began to scare himself as he imagined his beloved, pristine snow drifts being overtaken by blood vines, reducing the stone of the cabins and the ramparts into nothing but rubble, crawling over everything until it reached the sails of Puffy's windmill, right at the top of the hill.

Thinking of his mother made him think of his son: Michael. Tubbo screwed his eyes shut as the guilt of leaving him to sleep peacefully at home began to finally sink in. He wouldn't dream of taking the little piglin to the Greater SMP in the state it was in now, but he still wanted to know that his child was safe.

Maybe he shouldn't be a parent, just like he should never have been a president. Maybe he wasn't cut out to be anything else but someone's sidekick.

The thundering of hooves suddenly reached his ears, and Tubbo opened his eyes. Along the red covered walls of Eret's castle, two silhouettes galloped over the tendrils, heading straight towards the Community House at a rapid pace. As they grew nearer, Tommy pulled Tubbo out of their way and shielded him from the newcomers. The horses and their riders finally got to their level, abruptly stopping and rearing dangerously above the boys, heavy hooves threatening to fall down on them both.

The two men that rode them immediately tried to control their steeds, yanking their reins away from Tommy and Tubbo and attempting to sweet talk the horses into submission.

The small mushrooms speckling their silk clothes and the sharp sais strapped to their backs – as well as the direction they had ridden in – told Tubbo that they hailed from Kinoko Kingdom, and he immediately held his head high.

He pushed Tommy away and approached the riders, who were busy looking around them and taking in the redness of the landscape. Their mounts pawed the ground, snorting out breaths of discomfort and anxiously tossing their manes. The Egg visibly didn't just put the people of the realms on edge.

"What's going on?" Tubbo began, striving for some sort of clarification.

He hoped that the newcomers might have been there to bring an important message of some sort. That fantasy was soon shattered once they finally took note of his presence, looking just as surprised as the boys were to see faces out so late.

"The Council sent us when the tendrils began to take over," one of the Kinokians said, struggling to keep his eyes on Tubbo as his steed insisted on spinning in nervous circles.

"But it seems that the situation is just as bad here as in Kinoko," said the other, casting glances around them once again.

Tubbo followed their eyes, and clicked his tongue. "Yeah," he agreed, "it's pretty bad."

"Do you know where Karl is?" the first man asked quickly, fiddling the reins of his horse between his fingers.

"We don't know," Tommy spoke up before Tubbo could reply. "There's no one on the streets except for us."

"And the tendrils," Tubbo added.

The Kinokians gave each other a look Tubbo couldn't decipher, but ended up nodding and patting their horse's neck and spurring them into a gentle canter.

"If you see him, please send a message to Kinoko's Council. We need to get him back to safety as soon as possible."

The second man glanced behind him, narrowing his eyes. "Or don't," he said. "You kids need to stay safe and out of trouble."

Without another word, they dashed off, the thundering hooves soon fading as they galloped through the western arch of the Community House and into the territory beyond.

The boys didn't move or speak at first, the only thing breaking up the stifling silence of the junction being Sam Nook's high pitched chattering – the raccoon was seemingly just as nervous as the horses were. As everyone was.

"The Egg reached Kinoko," Tommy finally said, and Tubbo turned to him.

"That's bad," he whispered, stomach dropping even lower than it already had. He swallowed hard. "Kinoko's a good distance away from the Greater SMP..."

His best friend's tough exterior seemed to waver, and the ram watched as he rushed to peer out of every individual archway, lingering for a moment before moving along.

"This is bad, this is fucking bad," he heard his friend mutter under his breath.

Tubbo leapt forwards with a soft bleat of surprise, feeling something tight and slimy circle his ankle. With no boots, the carpet of red thorns dug painfully into the soles of his hooves, making him wince. The lone tendril that had reached to grab him retreated into the sea-like mass that surrounded them.

"We need to go and check the rest."

The young ram snapped his head up, confused, "What?"

"We need to go and see how far it's spread," Tommy said, counting a tally on his shaking fingers. "We need to check L'Manberg, the Badlands, the rest of the Greater SMP—"

Tubbo frowned. "Tommy, you're not trying to be a hero again, are you?"

"—and Pandora's Vault." His friend suddenly faltered, his uncertain gaze turning to a horrified one in a flash. "Tubbo, we *can't* let the Egg reach the Vault."

"Why not? Dream's not there anymore."

Oh boy, that was clearly the wrong thing to say, as the sharp, dagger-like glare that Tommy watched him with made him gulp. Then Tubbo remembered, and his self-centered worry turned to compassion in the bat of an eye.

"Tommy, I—"

"We can't let the tendrils tear down the prison."

Tubbo couldn't help but wonder if Tommy was truly concerned for the structure itself, or rather feared what remains he'd find in it once the vines would open it up for all to see.

"Alright," he agreed, "we check where the Egg has spread to, and we defend the Vault."

How they would defend it from a demonic army of briar and snapping plants was the real question: they had barely escaped the Egg alive when it was somewhat docile. The hostility that leaked from every bulbous tendril pore and loud silence was far, far more

dangerous, and with only one life each, they had never been easier targets for the growths' wrath.

They set off through the northernmost archway, and began to make their way down the Prime Path.

Tubbo had never seen the place so cramped, and yet so desolate. The colourful array of flowers that used to border the roads had been swallowed up by the crimson, and the smooth wooden planks beneath their feet were practically invisible. The ram tried to ignore it all, which was much harder to do than it sounded.

They followed the path down into the heart of the Greater SMP, the blackstone ramparts of Punz's castle looming to their left. The vines had clambered up those walls too, and curled over the edge like a wave of blood, frozen in time.

"Look at the streetlights," Tommy suddenly said, pointing in front of them.

Tubbo peered at the nearest glowstone lamps, watching curiously as the vines began to twist and slither up the poles, circling the mellow glow like fierce predators impatiently awaiting the perfect moment to pounce on their prey. But why the lights...?

"It's going for all of them."

Tubbo followed Tommy's pointed finger, and felt his blood run cold.

"What is it doing...?"

"In the spirit of moving forward and celebrating this unity, we have gathered so many of you together to share a memorable banquet I don't think any of us are going to forget – including some of the more forgetful of our attendees."

Bad raised his glass towards Ranboo, seated not too far from the head of the table. The hybrid seemed surprised at the sudden attention, and sank down in his seat when a well-mannered laugh echoed from a few of the other guests.

Further down the table, Technoblade's stern gaze burned into Bad's, and the demon quickly turned his attention back to his speech.

"After all, what is unity if not sharing a meal, banter and a dance or two with each other, but also striving towards a common goal?" he went on. "The Egg wishes for us all to be

united; for the Greater SMP, Kinoko, Las Nevadas, the Antarctic Commune present at this very table to join peacefully with the Eggpire. And do you all know what I think? I think it's right. We should let any past issues be swept under the carpet, and to unite once again and advance together from this point onward."

A hush fell over the room, only broken by the mumbled agreements of the Eggpire folk. The other guests began to give each other odd looks, quickly darting their eyes towards Bad before whispering about the puzzling choice of words.

Technoblade, Eret, Quackity and Karl in particular seemed to be the wariest, momentarily casting any tensions aside to share a growing concern the demon could sense even from his own chair.

Bad stretched out his arms, gesturing to the generous banquet laid out across the sea of white tablecloths.

"So come, my friends," he exclaimed happily, "take a bite, and let the flavours consume you and bring you to us. Let this cavern be the birthplace of a new era, the sole light in a world full of darkness."

The gathering started to look increasingly unsettled. Those who were not part of the Egg's cult began to look at their full plates with horror, pushing them away. Those who had already taken a bite or a drink stared at the empty spots, nauseous, clutching their stomachs and their throats.

Bad frowned as the unsettlement among his esteemed guests began to rise, and consequently his own with it. Visibly, his transparency regarding the food had raised some red flags – the wrong ones he wanted to hoist among them, that was for sure.

Pursing his lips and ignoring the apprehensive glances cast his way, he cleared his throat and decided to get straight to the point of that evening.

"I will now ask Eret, Karl, Quackity, and Technoblade to pledge their allegiance and land to the Eggpire."

The four leaders in question snapped their heads around in shock, the food swiftly forgotten by everyone as the focus shifted.

"Bad, this is ridiculous!" Eret cried.

Bad didn't budge. "You've clearly shown us that friendly diplomacy achieves nothing with you."

"The Greater SMP will not be a part of this."

The king stood up with a flourish, eyes blazing. Gathering up the folds of his dress, he turned around and prepared to leave.

Two armoured guards moved in front of him, sharp spears blocking the monarch's path. Two more marched into the distance, barricading the door.

"I suggest you comply with us, Your Majesty," Bad said as Eret turned back to face him, "or your kingdom will be torn to the ground, and your people killed."

Shouts of shock and indignation rose from the guests hailing from the Greater SMP, and they all stood up from their seats like their king. More red-eyed guards emerged from their hiding spots, weapons poised for attack.

Bad's empathy had amounted to nothing in the past, and he faced the agitation with a stone-cold expression. "That goes for all of you," he spat, pointing at the other leaders.

"*What?!*" Technoblade roared, shaking the very floor they all stood on.

"The Egg has taken the proper courses of action," Bad replied calmly. With the knowledge that all weapons had been confiscated at the entrance, he was much, much less fearful of the piglin. "It's simply waiting for your decision now. We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Quackity was the next to rise from his seat, shaking his head.

"You son of bitch..." he breathed out, giving Bad a sarcastic grin of disbelief – the grin of a man who had certainly known that something was off about the masquerade, but was still bewildered by the host's audacity to go through with it all. He looked almost impressed.

Karl leapt up as well. "We trusted you!" he yelled, voice too high to sound confident. "What about turning over a new leaf?!"

"That leaf is staying where it is, but you can be a part of it now. It's big enough for all of you, and even those beyond your borders."

"You're outnumbered, Bad," Quackity smirked, gesturing to the crowd. "It's us and our angry people against you and the pussies hiding behind your red weed!"

Bad looked out over the gathering, taking in every face. Almost everyone was up and out of their seats, and the guards were still moving in, threatening. A few masked faces were twisted by fury, but so many more were wide-eyed and terrified, eyeing the advancing spears nervously.

The demon *did* falter, however, and wondered if Quackity had a point. They looked frightened, but Bad knew many of them had seen a fair share of violence. He wondered how many would end up snapping out of it and joining what could be a bloody riot.

His breathing hitched, he glanced at Antfrost. His friend's whiskers were twitching, and his pupils were narrowed. He kept bearing and retracting his claws, kneading the soft tablecloth anxiously as his tail whipped from side to side. A growl began to rumble in his throat.

Bad *thought* it was from the cat, at first, until his head began to ache. The Egg. It was just as impatient as its disciples, and wasted no time in doing something about it. The demon knew it had no patience for failure.

Out of the corner of the demon's eye, the cavern began to churn and shudder in crimson waves, unhinged and unstable. The tendrils across the ceiling slithered and hissed like cobras, curling between the rocks and dashing between the feet of unsuspecting attendees who gasped in surprise. The cave continued to undulate like an angry, bloody ocean in a bottle, ready to drown and swallow everyone caught in its path, mercy be damned.

Then all of a sudden, the world disappeared. The lights went out, and the worried whispers turned into yells.

"Blackout! Blackout!"

Outside of the cavern, the world turned just as dark, the only lights still burning being the stars in the heavens, and the pulsating tendrils of death.

Two boys stood in the middle of the blackness, holding hands and frozen in horror as hisses began to fill the once-silent nighttime.

"Everyone relax, *please*."

Now partially shrouded by darkness, Bad had regained his confidence, as had the rest of his acolytes. The rest of the Eggpire had been just as frightened at first too, but were soon reassured once it was clear that they were not the ones that were going to suffer the consequences. They sat back in their seats and drank some more, watching lazily as their fellow partygoers stumbled around like headless chickens, shrieking their heads off.

"What's going on?!"

"Help me!"

"Where are you?!"

"Ranboo, stick with me."

"I'm coming!"

"I can't see!"

"Somebody better open the godsdamned doors!"

"Karl! Karl! Where are you?!"

Bad had no idea that George had tagged along that evening.

Bad momentarily closed his eyes, plunging his vision into darkness once again. A darkness so absolute, he picked up every word, every frightened yell. Some voices he recognized, others he didn't. Between it all, the Egg hissed and spat like a fire, and the combined rush of noises flooded the demon's brain and gave him a migraine.

Thankfully, the screaming panic the blackout had caused didn't last for too long. Everyone soon gathered their bearings by the light of the candelabras lined along the tables that cast feeble pools of light upon the abandoned feast. The Egg's glowing pores and flowers also did their part, shimmering orange through the darkness of the cave. The guests rushed to stand by and hold figures familiar to them. Pure panic turned to still confusion, and still confusion to a collective fear.

"We don't want to hurt you," Bad assured them all, shreds of guilt and compassion momentarily overpowering the will of the Egg. He sat down, ignoring the trembling in his arms. "We're giving you all an opportunity to be our allies rather than our enemies. The Egg will continue to grow until it spreads and takes over all your realms, and beyond. We're offering you a chance to *live*."

A low voice from the darkness spoke up, its owner stepping into the candlelight. "I would rather lose all my lives," said the king.

"That could be easily arranged, Your Majesty," Antfrost purred next to the demon, and the previously silent, watchful members of the Eggpire became a lot more rowdy.

With their enemies now cornered and with nowhere else to go, all they could do was rejoice – many were gleefully awaiting that moment where the mighty monarchs, leaders and warriors would finally kneel before them.

Bad couldn't care less about any of that. His mind was only filled with one thing apart from the Egg's praises.

Skeppy.

Skeppy would be safe, indefinitely.

That was worth everything to him. The Egg's promise to leave Skeppy alone was all that mattered, and Bad was ready to do whatever it took to—

A bang echoed around the cavern, and the mixed shouts of indignation and glee suddenly turned into frightened screams.

The next series of events happened so fast, Bad could barely comprehend what was going on.

He snapped his head towards the sound. A bright blue trail of light had shot up towards the ceiling, rocking the cave walls as it exploded loudly and scattered sparks back down onto the crimson world below.

And there, taking a big step onto the table, crossbow aloft and busy reloading it with another firework, was Technoblade.

His feet violently kicked away the platters of food and jugs of wine, spilling them all over the floor, tablecloth, and his own boots.

"Alright, no one move," he boomed, his voice just as loud and intimidating as the firework missile he had set off a mere moment ago.

He began pointing his crossbow at everything and everyone that dared move. Screams of terror followed as people ducked for cover, their hands over their head and their wails increasing.

He swung around again, this time aiming for the other side of the room. Out of the corner of Bad's eye, he saw more figures move and gingerly braced for the inevitable shots to start firing, gutting them one by one and leaving their bodies full of colour and third-degree burns. But Techno's crossbow didn't even so much as linger on them, and before the demon knew it, he watched as four more people joined the piglin in standing on top of the carefully laid tables.

More dishes and wasted food fell, and Bad couldn't stop himself from turning his blazing gaze onto the culprits of the disturbances.

Nikki, Philza and Ranboo stared back at him, defiant, but the demon's rage soon reached its peak when his eyes landed on none other than Captain Puffy herself.

The hem of her crimson dress, now soaked by spilled wine, turned the fabric to a dark, blood red, and the ferocity in her stare was unlike anything he had ever seen her bear.

Betrayal stung him like a wasp.

Out of everyone present that night, Puffy was the one Bad had been so eager to welcome back into the Eggpire. Not only had she been an asset, but she was a friend, and he had sorely missed her company when she turned on them.

Now, she was standing tall and proud as Technoblade's ally, and Bad wanted to tear her throat out.

He prepared to lunge, sharp claws ready to skin that petty sheep alive. If a fight was what they wanted, a fight was what he was going to give them, with or without the rest of his acolytes behind him.

But before he could, a hand grabbed the back of his suit and yanked him backwards into his chair. Bad let out a small gasp and was about to scream for help, when he felt a cold, dangerously familiar sharpness press through his jacket.

"Think about harming her again and I'll rip all of your remaining lives from your body," someone threatened, their voice too indisputably familiar to be brushed aside.

The cold eyes of judgment, the phantom of his guilt.

"Are... are you a ghost?" Bad whispered, the point in his spine drawing out sharp breaths from him with every nudge.

Sam hesitated, crouched behind Bad's seat. He fiddled with the hilt of his dagger, pondering the question for a moment or two.

After all, he *was* supposed to be dead, Bad had made sure of that.

"Yeah," he hissed in a low, dangerous voice, pressing the blade deeper into the demon's back, "I'm a ghost, and I'm here for your head."

Chapter Sixty-Three: The Cat's Claws

"Everybody needs to calm down and listen carefully!" Technoblade yelled, still aiming his crossbow at the slightest shuffle. "We're not here to harm you!"

"Hear that, Bad?" the phantom said, making the demon shudder. "We're not here to harm anyone. Just do what we tell you to, and no one gets hurt."

Bad whimpered, his culpability only growing with every tug of his suit and jolt in his back. "Please, I never meant to harm anyone—"

"Don't give me that bullshit. You hurt Ranboo, you hurt Puffy, you tried to hurt Technoblade, and you left me to die. You hurt us all, no matter what you think."

A plaintful sob escaped Bad's throat, and he momentarily closed his eyes, trying to convince himself that this was all a bad dream, that he'd wake up and everything – phantoms, enemies, obligations, even the Egg – would disappear.

"Sam, you don't understand," he choked, "I need to do this. I have a reason, you just don't understand—"

"Save your breath, you might need it."

The spike, or whatever it was, was still digging firmly into his spine, and Bad squirmed. All he got in return was a sharper pain, this time at the back of his ribs, and a hushed, disapproving tut.

"Scream and I'll kill you."

The point drifted downwards, hovering over the weakest spot in his lower back. The demon didn't say anything, for fear of angering the already vengeful ghost.

"Alright, this is how it's going to go," Techno said, his voice rising above everything and everyone else. Bad couldn't help but listen. "Everyone's going to get out, unscathed. You'll be divided into three groups. The first will be made up of the uninfected, and escorted out immediately. Those who were tricked into eating and drinking anything, or hear the Egg, will be next, to be kept under strict surveillance until we say otherwise. And finally—" Techno aimed his weapon straight at Bad. "—the Eggpire will be allowed to leave, on their own feet if they cooperate, in shackles if they don't."

"What is this?" Punz spat, banging his hands on the table. "Some sort of coup?"

"Call it whatever you want."

"You have no authority here," the mercenary snarled.

Another firework was shot, this time exploding just above Punz's head. More screams ensued, and Bad watched Punz's eyes twitch under his mask. He was terrified.

"Take that as my final warning," Techno grunted, reloading with another rocket. "Next time, I'll make sure not to miss."

A low, guttural growl filled the cavern, rippling off the walls and vibrating through the floor. The tendrils began to twist and turn again, and Bad felt the colour drain from his face.

"The Egg is angry," he said, just loud enough so everyone could hear him.

The gathering shared glances of increasing concern, but Technoblade's stoic expression didn't change.

"So am I, so get a move on," he replied sharply, then turned his head to someone behind him. "Eret, get your people together and start heading out."

The king of the Greater SMP nodded, a relieved and grateful smile gracing his face. "Thank you, Technoblade."

He began rounding up the nobles from his court and other inhabitants of his land, briefly asking soft questions and inspecting their eyes. Then, he led them away from the tables and down to the ballroom floor, the parade lit up by the couple of candelabras they had snatched up in passing. Although the authority that evening had shifted, the darkness hadn't.

Seeing such a big group so far away now, the reality of everything finally began to sink deep into Bad's blackened skin. Was this it? After so much meticulous planning, sleepless nights and prayers to the Egg, this is how the Red Banquet ended: everyone leaving as they had come in, and the fall of an entire empire by the word of a piglin with a pretty display of fireworks?

And Bad wouldn't get what he had worked so hard to achieve, the only thing he ever wanted, the only promise he had pleaded for the Egg to honour. The whispers were angry, at him, at them, at everything, too angry to bear, and his heart sank.

It was never meant to be.

"Stand up," commanded the voice behind his back, yanking him up.

The demon swallowed hard and let out a shaky breath. He slowly rose from his chair, holding on to the table for support with his trembling fingers, his claws digging so deeply into it that he was close to snapping them straight off.

The sharp object continued to trail down the bumps and ridges of his back bones, tearing at the fragile seams of his suit. Bad kept his eyes forward.

"Sam, can you promise me something?" he whispered.

A pause.

"What?"

"Can you just..." He trailed off, then swallowed down his stammer. "If I somehow don't get out of this, can you make sure Skeppy's alright?"

Another pause.

"Skeppy left for good, Bad. You said so yourself."

The demon hesitated before answering, his mouth dry.

"He... he didn't leave, at least not forever. I just made sure he was safe and hidden away, and—" He cut himself off, knowing full well that he had started to ramble. "He came back, he's in the mansion. Please, take care of him, that's all I ask of you."

Bad just needed the certainty that Skeppy would be looked after, whether it would be in life or death – or whatever other atrocity the Egg was going to inflict on his friend. He could only hope that the spirit of a warden would be a watchful, caring guardian for him. The demon didn't care what would happen to himself as long as Skeppy was safe in the end.

"So, you lied about that too," Sam hissed, and Bad felt his blood run cold. "A liar and a murderer. How could I trust anything you say?"

He couldn't. Bad knew Sam's tone well: he had already made up his mind, and he wasn't going to back down on what he thought. If he wasn't going to believe Bad the first time, then he wasn't going to believe him any other time, and there was no changing that. The phantom of the warden was right, Bad should have simply kept quiet and saved his breath.

For a moment, yes, Bad thought that there was no way out. The Red Banquet would achieve nothing, and the Egg would stagnate, more hostile and seething than ever. Eret's group wasn't even half way across the vast expanse of the dancefloor when a loud yowl suddenly pierced the air.

"Bad! Look out!"

A chair next to him was knocked over and fell to the floor with a bang. The demon barely had the time to turn his head towards the sound when a tan and red hurricane suddenly leapt behind him. There was a cry of surprise, the grip on his suit was dropped, and Bad sucked in a scream as a blade cut clean through his back.

A white hot pain tore through him, travelling from one side of his ribcage to the opposite shoulder blade. He staggered forward, catching himself on the edge of the table.

Wincing and biting his lip, the demon shakily grabbed a white napkin and pressed it painfully against his back. When he removed it, it was soaked in dark liquid as grey as the storm clouds hanging over Pandora's Vault. He held it up for all to see, desperately trying to channel his pain into his actions and his words.

"They lied to us."

His hand trembled, clutching the sopping wet fabric tarnished with his own blood. His throat was raw, his own sentences suffocating him.

Things were bad enough as they were, and everyone's heads were turned towards him, him and the sounds of a vicious struggle happening somewhere behind. Things didn't – and shouldn't – need to escalate any more.

But there was still a spark of hope, a fleeting idea that briefly crossed the demon's mind.

In the midst of chaos, there was always opportunity; and that opportunity was the last chance of setting things right that night.

He raised the bloodied napkin up higher for all to see. Even in the dim light of the burning candelabras it was visible, disgustingly glossy. As he held up his arm, he painfully stretched his new wound, but grit his teeth against the flaming agony.

"They said that no one was to be hurt!" he screamed. "They lied to us! They lied!"

It wasn't much, but it was apparently all everyone needed to hear.

The Eggpire leapt out of their seats, narrowed eyes glued to their injured leader and already starting to arm themselves with the cutlery and the concealed weapons they had brought in that night. The rest of the gathering continued to cower and shoot each other anxious looks. They had no idea what to do, especially now. The small group from the Greater SMP also stopped in their tracks, drawn back to the scene no matter how hard their monarch tried to urge them towards the exit. Technoblade's eyes had grown wide, and he and his allies seemed to falter, their gazes flitting between the worried crowd, and the menacing Eggpire.

The demon kept his arm raised up high, right until his open wound became too much to bear. He slammed the napkin down violently on the table, hunched over and clutching his shoulder.

Unknowingly, his gesture had just started the one and only battle the Eggpire had ever fought, all their petty growth planting and blackmail nothing more than the weakest actions. Now they were ready to show their true power.

The hisses came back, this time louder and dulling the noise of his surroundings. The pain subdued, and Bad instead closed his eyes as he got lost in the vicious praises of his Lord. The world beyond his mind and the Egg faded, and he barely registered the cries of war that rose all around him.

He dug his claws deeper into his shoulder, the booming of another rocket vibrating through his bones. He let out a strangled sob.

No one was supposed to get hurt.

Punz had been waiting to take out his sword all evening.

Masquerades weren't his thing, and neither was peaceful diplomacy. He was a mercenary, and he was paid to kill. Being off duty for so long and reduced to standing beside petty, showy leaders like Bad and Antfrost made him restless.

And for Punz, restlessness meant agitation, and agitation meant a growing fury.

His anger only rose when Ponk had decided to let his stupid mouth slip and provoked him; when Bad disrupted Quackity's speech over nothing; and when Technoblade decided that he was above the Eggpire.

Now at his boiling point, he was very much ready to go berserk, cutting down friend and foe with no remorse. He needed a bloody outlet.

A good, vicious battle was exactly what he needed to let off some steam.

Fond memories of all the wars he had fought in beside Dream flooded back into his mind and although he didn't miss that cheap green bastard, he yearned for the rush of adrenaline and the promise of victory pumping in his veins.

Right there, right then, the Egg hissing and pounding in his head with the thunder of a thousand drums of war, he could relive that fantasy once again.

And yet, he was far more focused on one particular corner of the cavern where the perfect dummy for his swings stood erect, just waiting for him to chop down and take his anger out on.

He spared no thought for Bad and his gushing wound, none for Technoblade and his loaded crossbow, and none for any of his allies that had drawn their hidden weapons and had started to stand too.

There was no need to let out a war cry – Antfrost's yowl and Bad's speech had been all the army had needed in their own right. The first blows had already been dealt by the time Punz had located his next victim.

Punz tunneled his vision on his target, and leapt onto the table, already making his move. A tempest of chaos began to grow around him as a battle broke out, but he didn't care.

He only had eyes and bloodlust to kill the pirate who had ripped the only person he truly loved away from him – the brother he had loved above his land, above war, above riches.

He was going to make her pay.

"Sapnap, now!"

As the wave of red-eyed attackers began to swarm the scene, weapons drawn menacingly, Technoblade's cry echoed high over the shouts. Immediately, the rest of the Syndicate leapt into action.

Nikki bunched up the hem of her dress and rushed across the tabletops to Ranboo, grabbing his arm and forcing him down to the floor. They huddled by the side of the table, jumping every time a firework went off and a blade clashed against another, or worse, against a body.

"Don't get into a fight," she said sternly, ignoring his splutters of protest.

"But, Techno..." He sheepishly took out the concealed knife he had hidden in his boot, showing it to the girl.

She snatched it from him, shaking her head. "Get people out, and avoid all combat."

She was well aware that her replies were curt and short, but the young hybrid had to understand how serious this all was.

Ranboo's pointed ears flattened against his head. "You don't trust me," he muttered, sounding deeply offended.

"It's not that I don't trust you," Nikki said, "it's just that I know you're a kid and Techno tends to forget that. We can't have you losing another life foolishly. Just stay out of combat."

She thought he was going to protest again, but he ended up closing his mouth and nodding. They gave each other one last look and hand-squeeze of comfort, and parted ways. Ranboo ran off somewhere towards the left side of the cave, and she could just about hear him start to urge some of the guests out.

Nikki rose out from behind the table, ducking down immediately once a scarlet-eyed maniac swung an axe at her head. She quickly pulled out Ranboo's knife and with a few quick, clean swings, she could finally get on with what she was supposed to do.

She grabbed the nearest candelabra and, raising it high like the flaming torch in the hand of a Greek statue, shone it around her.

Her corset grew tighter as she felt and saw swift, moving shadows brush past her, their blades sliding against the silk with the featherlight touch of a bird's wings. A couple of the dainty little butterflies lining her skirt dropped off, fluttering to the floor with their stitching in shambles. They were then promptly trodden on by heavy feet locked in vicious scuffles.

Nikki was forced to fight her way through another couple of attacks – using the knife and the candles to simultaneously stab and burn – before being able to focus on the growing carnage again.

Finally, she saw the person she was looking for, weaving in and out of the tendrils against the wall like a phantom, his half-mask cutting through the darkness. His hands were bare, glowing with the gentle intensity of the Nether's lava lakes.

She wasted no time in rushing to his side, and tapped his shoulder. He spun around, startled, and went to shove one of his boiling hands in her face. She caught him by his clothed forearm, the warmth of his body still radiating through the linen.

"Sapnap, relax. It's me."

"Don't fucking do that again," he scolded her.

He yanked his arm away and proceeded to roll up his sleeves. His fingers left dark, smoking prints behind them, charring the shirt. More bubbling, bright orange veins curled up his forearms, disappearing underneath the rolled sleeves before being glimpsed again on his chest and darting up his neck. His aura was sweltering, the fire pumping through his body turning the fireborn into a sparking, burning star ready to explode at any moment.

Nikki was far from intimidated, and put her hand on her hip. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think? I'm burning this place to the ground!"

She looked around them, their surroundings nothing more than a colourless void, the only lights being that of the fireborn's burning skin, the dim candles and the faraway glare of the battle taking place beside the Egg.

"Sure looks like it," she noted with a frown.

Sapnap looked like he was just about to blow his top. "You think I'd just light it anywhere? What if it gets kicked out or we get caught?"

Nikki had to admit that the fireborn had a point. "So now what?"

"I was just about to get it done, when someone decided to interrupt me!"

She sighed, exasperated. Both Sapnap and Nikki would never be the bestest of friends, no matter how many smiles, jokes and secret missions they shared. That was the least of the girl's worries and priorities however, there and then.

"I'm helping you," she decided.

Sapnap rolled his eyes. "No, you're not."

"Yes, I am, and don't try to stop me."

She waved the three-branched stand threateningly in front of his eyes, his mask slowly cooking under the moving flames. He raised an eyebrow, unimpressed, and flared up one of the candles with a quick pinch of his fingers.

"I'm the fireborn here," he reminded her.

"But you're not the only arsonist."

"You burned a tree, and I burned down a kingdom."

"Well, the Eggpire was built around a plant, wasn't it? Seems like we're both useful in this situation."

Sapnap fell silent, and Nikki smiled smugly, knowing full well that she had made her point and won with it.

"Your dress might catch fire."

"Nice try. Let's just do this, together, alright? Together."

The fireborn still seemed hesitant, but had realized that Nikki wasn't going to take no for an answer. "Fine, but you stick with me and do what I tell you to."

"I know how to use fire, Sapnap."

"And I was born in fire, Nikki. Didn't think that would be something people would easily forget!"

Sam really wished that he had learned to fight with a dagger.

Technoblade had offered to teach him, but that wasn't the problem. It was simply the fact that Sam had refused, despite the piglin's insistence that he should "broaden his weaponry skills".

He was master in trident-fighting, a damn good shot with the bow and crossbow, and had only just started almost beating Technoblade with the sword. As far as he was concerned, he could put off any new fighting skills until further notice.

He most definitely regretted that now.

Antfrost wasn't a warrior when he first came to the SMP; he used to be a peaceful, smiling bundle of joy with an avid interest in biology and fur as soft as a duckling's down. He had picked up a few skills throughout the years and had become a cautious yet deadly hunter, but Sam had never seen him like this before.

His eyes were red and vacant – darker and more dangerous than the Egg's own infection. They weren't even seeing anymore, veiled with the raw fury of a charging bull, unable to think straight and unable to stop. His once polished red suit had quickly torn, dressing his spasmic, agile frame with little more than rags.

And Sam's short dagger blade held in an inexperienced hand was no match for the beast.

Antfrost had been glued to him for the past few minutes with his hackles raised to high heavens. He leapt and tackled him from every side, claws swinging and slashing at every inch of skin he could reach. Sharp jaws snapped way too close to his neck for comfort, and the only thing Sam could do to protect himself was try to shove the cat's lightweight body at an arm's length.

His dagger was useless.

Sam quickly tossed it aside, then leapt high over one of the tables. Spinning around, he snatched up a fallen candelabra and brought it up in front of him, just in time to parry one of Antfrost's lunges. The impact flung the cat to the side and he hit the floor. He didn't move for a moment or two, and Sam's stomach sank, fearing the worst.

Then, out of the blue, the feline staggered to his feet again and twisted around, focusing on his target again with an ear-piercing yowl.

Sam looked down at his three-branched candle holder, and gripped the stand tightly. Three blunt prongs were better than none, and he used them to their fullest.

As they fought on, Sam couldn't help but spare a look at the chaos around them all. With friends and foes alike locked in intense, brutal combat, the Red Banquet had turned into a massacre. Even some of the guests out of the Syndicate's circle had picked up whatever they could to help Technoblade and the others, the stench of their fear and desperation undoubtedly flaring up the piglin's nostrils.

Even Velvet, who Sam had glimpsed so briefly off to the side, had been dragged into it all, armed with nothing but a fork and flailing around against an opponent so much bigger than him. He was standing his ground, for sure, but Sam didn't know how long for.

His own adrenaline reaching a boiling point, Sam suddenly dropped his weapon and grabbed Antfrost's shoulders. Using all his strength, he shoved the cat around and

pinned him up against the smooth, crimson surface of the Egg. Sam could feel it vibrate and seethe with rage, but he only focused on one thing.

Trying desperately to block everything else out of his mind, he stared deeply into Ant's sharp, unmoving gaze.

"Ant, it's me," he growled in a low tone, tightening his fingers around the feline's shoulders. "It's Sam!"

Something flashed across the cat's gaze – a single shred of recognition, and it had proved that there was still something else inside this rabid, scarlet-infected body.

Ant's muscles relaxed, and the claws digging into Sam's chest let go.

"S-Sam?" a strained mewl echoed, far away and stumbling over the three letter name.

"Yes, Ant, it's me; your friend."

Finally, part of Antfrost had leaked through, the furrowed brow turning into wide-eyed shock and the furiously whipping tail coming to a standstill. Sam let his own guard down, managing to push away the Egg's outraged insults.

Tentatively, he reached out and cupped his friend's furry cheek, fingers sinking into his fur, like he used to do when Ant was stressed or growing sick with worry, usually before a battle.

Sam began to wonder if Velvet used to do the same thing.

"I'm your friend," he repeated, syncing his own breathing with Ant's and attempting to stop it from shaking.

"Sam's dead."

A yowl rang in his ears, followed by a gradual warmth spreading down his arm as claws raked across his sleeve. He cried out and yanked at the fur beneath his fingers, earning him a deep scratch to his cheek underneath his mask.

Once again, Antfrost held the upper hand and tackled Sam to the ground, rolling them away from the Egg and springing back up, ready to pounce again.

As he ducked and weaved the new sequence of brutal swings, Sam's heart sank, as he began to realize only one of them would get out of their duel with their lives intact.

Sapnap had already moved on, his flaming figure moving on towards an unknown destination. Nikki rushed to keep up, tripping over a few moving tendrils that had escaped her senses.

Fortunately, the fireborn kept glancing back ever so often, making sure that she was still sticking with him. Once or twice, he reached out his hand to help her, only to pull back when they both remembered the danger of touching his sizzling skin.

Eventually, they reached a mess of red tendrils much bigger and thicker than most of the ones curling around the room. Shining her own flames over them, Nikki managed to glimpse a large, obvious mound of soul sand nursed in the crook of the growths, glittering with the gritty grey and brown shine of gunpowder.

Sapnap crouched down beside it. "The fuse," he introduced with a flourish. "Would you like to do the honours?"

Nikki thought for a moment, mulling over the offer. Then, she realized there was no time to do so. Then, she also realized that no matter how many times she shut down the fireborn's arguments or wanted to play a part, this wasn't her moment.

She shook her head, "Be my guest."

Sapnap rubbed his hands together greedily, sparks flying like flint and steel. He gave Nikki one last look for her confirmation, which she gave without a second thought. The fireborn's hand hovered nervously over the fuse, a tenseness still lingering in the air. It was only broken up by the muffled, distant cracks and thunder rocketing from the Blood God's crossbow, in a striking likeness to a scene from history that many had witnessed.

Nikki in particular knew of the details from Philza's numerous, grief-stricken ramblings he let flow when he thought no one was listening.

Poor, poor Wilbur...

At least his passing had saved him from the countless horrors that had arisen since.

A small flame ignited in the center of Sapnap's palm, and they both fell silent. The fireborn cradled it gently against his skin, staring at it with stark fascination as it danced with the ethereal grace of a pixie.

"Well..." Sapnap raised two fingers up in a small salute and clicked his tongue. "It was never meant to be."

In one, swift movement, he brutally crumpled up the fire and threw it against the pile of soul sand. Upon impact, glittering clouds curled up into the air and hung in suspension for a magical moment or two, before drifting back down and covering the flame. Everything was dim and silent, and then the first spit of the ember flew out from the fuse. Then another, and another. The bright orange flame turned to an ice-cold blue, and the pile of soul sand was soon up in azure flames.

A fuse, Sapnap had called it, and a fuse it was. It was only a matter of time before the flames began to spread, licking along the twisting trails of soul sand that cascaded down from its tendril perch and ran along the floor. The fire sped along like a blue demon, its route pre-determined and set, leaving high, burning spikes in its wake that only continued to burn and grow.

Nikki took a step back and Sapnap soon joined her, eyes riveted to the burning pile. They were careful when stepping over the blazing trails, and couldn't help but stand and watch in a moment of reprieve and mesmerization.

As the blue flames continued to spread further, bolts of sudden lightning in the outer obscurity, they began to reveal the trails, and thus the footsteps, of each of their friends that night. A particularly messy group of squiggles indicated some sort of argument or struggle; longer trails, a peaceful promenade; a larger pile, a stop to mingle with a familiar face; and a dazzling collection of spirals coated the dancefloor with a glowing, dizzying mandala – remains of a just as gorgeous waltz.

No matter how harsh their actions were, and how ruined the evening would undoubtedly become for many of the guests, Nikki couldn't deny that there was a staggering beauty in the flaming ballet spreading all around them.

The relative silence that had followed the detonation however soon broke up the magnificence, as people had finally begun to clock on to what was happening. Louder and more panicked screams reached her ears and although years of wars should have numbed her from it all, Nikki screwed her eyes shut and tried her best to block them out.

Her grip on the candelabra tightened, and she focused on the task again. Now was not the time for regrets or thoughts of going back on her decision.

"Sapnap," she said, opening her eyes again and turning to the fireborn, "we need to keep it going."

He agreed with a nod, "We need to make sure not a single growth is untouched."

Holding up his hands, he smiled as they flared up completely, his fire-wielding abilities at full power.

"Ready to do some arson?" he smirked.

Nikki held up the flaming candles, and grinned back. "I was born ready."

It was only then that another shriek pierced the air, louder and more painful than anything they had ever heard before. The whole room seemed to still as fighters and party goers alike clapped their hands over their ears in an attempt to drown it out, heads and eardrums throbbing and bleeding out abundantly.

The blue fire had finally reached its main targets; the thickest, juiciest tendrils, and the Egg itself, engulfing the once darkened and crimson room in a sudden burst of bright blue and silver light.

And the price to pay was a collection of blood curdling screeches that could be heard from far across the land.

Like many kids his age, Tommy hated being yelled at.

During his exile, when Dream manipulated him under the pretense of being a good friend, he was yelled at a lot, for the slightest of things. A shovel left misplaced overnight, a tease that went a little too far, or even just asking about his home across the sea. Tommy would cover his ears and cower as Dream's sharp words and knuckles would rain down upon him, and he blubbered out nonsense instead of a coherent argument or apology.

That wasn't to say that Tommy was completely submissive to his peers' shouts and disciplinary screams. He lashed back truly aggressively once in a while, but only when he knew (or rather, hoped) that they cared for him and would never hurt him.

He was a strong boy, but he still hated hearing screams of anger, of war, of suffering.

Tonight, he had hit the jackpot with a sound loud enough to rival all three.

Tommy fell to his knees, the shrillness of the long, drawn-out shriek pounding in his head, chilling the blood in his veins, and attempting to rip his very soul out of him.

"Tommy! Tommy!"

A hand wrapped around his own, and something small scuttled into his lap. He barely acknowledged anything.

"Tommy, what's going on?!"

Oh, that he definitely heard that, a loud shout right next to his covered up ear. He wanted to yell back, but his own throat wouldn't let him.

"I don't know," he muttered through gritted teeth, "but it's fucking loud!"

And loud it was, so loud that it became quiet after only a few moments. Quiet, perhaps not exactly, but his brain had numbed it out enough for the shrieks to dull to the deafening droning of an alarm. It still pounded incessantly, but he could somewhat function.

It was only when he raised his gaze up that the true horror hit him – quite literally.

Something thick and scarlet whacked him across the face, jolting his neck and connecting sharply with his nose. A sticky wet stream began to dribble down to his lips, and a stiff warmth spread through his abused muscles. He raised a trembling hand to his face, grimacing as his own blood soaked his fingers.

Ignoring Tubbo's cries of worry and Sam Nook's desperate chattering, Tommy focused back on the world of tendrils around them, or at least tried to.

"Look out!"

He yanked Tubbo down by the hood of his coat as a vine whipped past above their heads, just barely skimming the top of their scalps.

The landscape, previously still and unmoving like a forest of stone and red marble statues, was moving – why the fuck was it moving?!

And screaming – it must have been the tendrils, because no one else was out on the streets. The shrieks of pain were everywhere, rising into the sky with the intensity of a thousand dying martyrs tied to flaming pyres.

Dark, gesticulating, twisting, turning, and crying out in blazing agony, Tommy thought that his world was ending for an umpteenth time.

The absence of any light, save for the stars and the moon, was the least of his worries at that moment – but it certainly made everything worse. So much worse.

And if Tommy's blood was running cold, he could only imagine how frightened everyone else would be.

"We need to leave," he said, snatching up Nook from the floor and grabbing Tubbo's hands. He began to yank them both towards... somewhere. It was hard to tell exactly with the darkness and the constantly moving growths.

"Tommy! We need to help somehow!"

Tommy looked back, almost tripping over a root in the process. "What?" he spluttered, deciding that his best friend was clearly out of his mind. "Are you insane?! We need to keep moving!"

Tubbo, the young, stubborn ram he was, stayed put, his hooves digging sturdily into the ground beneath him. As sturdy as he could with it trembling like an earthquake.

His voice rose up above the screams, "Ranboo and Puffy need us! Everyone needs us! We have to do something!"

"What do you want us to do, kill the fucking Egg?!" Tommy's voice caught in his throat. "We're kids, Tubbo, fucking kids with a raccoon and no way to defend ourselves!"

"I know! I know that, Tommy, but we can't keep running! We could protect a family locked in their house, or—"

"That's exactly what we're doing! We're going to protect the Vault!" Tommy had no time or energy to correct himself on the mindless slip-up, but the surprised look in Tubbo's eyes told him that he had taken note of it. Tommy growled, "Shut up."

"Family?"

"Fuck off."

"The Vault's too big for just us two! We could do something else that's more useful like check up on people, or light the paths, or—"

Light the paths.

An idea flashed through Tommy's mind. If the Red Banquet had indeed ended in deep shit, there should have been at least a few people with half a sane brain left that would try to get out...

Helping people hadn't been something that he had done in ages, namely because it always somehow ended in one or more things going devastatingly wrong.

But this... this might actually work.

"Tubbo, you're a bloody genius..."

"Your Majesties! I mean, Majesty and other leaders... titles... Ah, damn it!"

Karl jumped when he felt a cold hand take his, and looked up. He had to crane his neck a little, but he eventually caught sight of a pair of red and green eyes, framed by a mask he knew all too well, and feared just as much.

It took all of his energy to overpower the memories of a time long gone, and remind himself that the people who wore the clothes now were nothing like Sir Billiam III and his entourage.

At least, he hoped they wouldn't be.

Ranboo tugged Karl's hand again, and Quackity's too. "We need to get you out of here," he said, pulling them towards the door.

"Oh no," Quackity said, yanking his fingers out from the hybrid's grasp, "I don't trust Technoblade, and I don't trust you!"

Karl rolled his eyes. "Quack—"

"And you, shut up!" the leader of Las Nevadas spat, jabbing an accusatory finger towards him. "I don't trust you or Sapnap either, not after you leave me and give me the evil eye whenever you can!"

Karl could feel and hear Quackity's anger – his face twisted with fury that made his scar look longer and deeper than it really was – but he could also sense his pain. The betrayal, the sadness and the heartache that made Karl's stomach sink.

He softened his tone. "You know it wasn't as simple as just leaving you," he said, frowning. His eyes trailed down to Quackity's hand, where he swallowed hard at the sight of the two engagement rings still glinting brightly. "There were many reasons."

"I fucking hate you both," Quackity snarled, with an undertone that clearly showed he thought nothing of the sort.

"Karl, Big Q, please. Now's not the time for diplomatic problems or matters of the heart."

King Eret stepped in between the two of them, turning a warm gaze towards Ranboo.

"I don't trust Technoblade completely either, but he was right about the food being tampered with."

Quackity scoffed. "Anyone with half a brain could see that was what was happening," he grumbled sourly.

Karl stayed quiet. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything either, but it wasn't because of his suspicions about the evening itself. The nausea from his déjà-vu fright and Sapnap's blazing glare from the other table had cut his appetite and his thirst.

"Even so," continued Eret, shooting Big Q a sharp look, "I trust Ranboo. So unless you want to get your last life ripped from you and have Las Nevadas crumble, I'd suggest you find that small amount of faith you still have in your old friend, and get a move on."

Quackity opened his mouth, speechless, and stammered something incomprehensible. Even Karl winced. No one brought up the question of how many lives someone had left unless it was a threat – and from Eret's scowl, it most definitely was. But it worked.

"Fine," Quackity muttered, head down. When Ranboo tried to take his hand again, however, he swiftly twisted his arm away, and readjusted his suit. "I can walk by myself, Ender boy."

Before long, Quackity had rushed off with the rest of the sweeping crowd, leaving his ex-fiancé, ex-friend and Eret behind.

The monarch sighed. "You have a strange taste in men, Karl," he said, clearly trying to keep the tone light.

Karl didn't say anything, and Ranboo's touch brought him back to reality.

"Please, we need to leave," he begged, dragging them impatiently towards the door.

He looked terrified, as they all were, constantly twitching his ears whenever the crack of a firework, the clash of a blade, the roar of a blue flame or a scream resonated in the burning cavern, and there were a lot of them.

Karl didn't pay attention to any of it – it was all too overwhelming.

The chaos.

He had enough of it: anywhere and anytime he went, it seemed to follow him, hiding just around the corner, a bad omen reminding him that peace was never here to stay. All the visions the universe chose to send him were those plagued with agony, never joy. There was barely a shred of happiness in any of them.

Suffering trailed him like a dog on a leash, always close, always snarling, and always walking in his shadow. He had learned to ignore its barking most days, and managed to live somewhat of a peaceful life because of it.

He only noticed it when it howled, when it was too loud and jarring to ignore.

And suddenly, it did. A long, drawn out sound of baying, that quickly morphed into the terrified scream of someone Karl knew all too well.

Someone he just realized was not beside him.

"George!"

He broke away from Ranboo's grasp, and despite the hybrid and Eret's best attempts at dragging him back with them, he turned heels and dove straight back into the flaming panic.

Karl was alone in a sea of shriveling and shrieking tendrils, spitting flames and frantic guests who were fighting the Eggpire and between themselves as they tried to claw their way out of the cavern. Every other moment, he was forced back against a pillar as another blade swung his way, embers and sparks licking the soft silk of his suit and leaving small, black burns behind as reminders. He still didn't waste any time, and continued his search, stumbling towards where he thought his friend was.

Time was precious, and he had learned not to waste it.

His mask had been lost somewhere in the scuffle, and perhaps that was for the best.

"George!" he yelled again, peering over the crowd and the bonfires.

Every time he thought he'd see him, it would end up just being another cluster of blue flames licking their way up a nearby pillar or darting across the floor. Every time he'd hear a scream echo beside him, it was simply another fighter or guest.

When a couple of tense minutes passed with no result, Karl began to pray for the unthinkable.

He began to pray for a vision.

No matter how painful it would be, he just needed to know if his friend was alright, if he'd survive, if he'd get out safely. That was all he wanted.

And for once, the universe was silent, purposely ignoring his request.

Or so he thought.

"Karl!"

There it was again, the unmistakable cry of his name. He continued to push through the fighters, frantically craning his neck until it hurt.

"George, where are you?!"

A single, high-pitched scream answered him and after finally seeking brief shelter along the outskirts of the cavern, Karl finally found his dear friend.

George was standing just a little distance away from him, cornered against the wall by a wave of burning, yet still advancing, tendrils. Their sharp, gnarled tips reached for his figure like a witch's fingers, desperately trying to claw at his suit and drag him towards them, into the flames of Hell.

Karl wasted no time in vaulting over a particularly large pile of smouldering debris, and sprinted towards his friend.

"George, I'm here!" he cried when he finally joined him. He turned the man's face into his shoulder, desperately trying to hide him from the flaming, hissing Egg.

"It says it can make me king again," George blubbered in a low voice, clinging on to Karl. "I don't want to be king anymore, Karl, I don't, I—"

The man's mask had been abandoned, just like Karl's, lying somewhere in the undulating mass of pain and hate that carpeted the floor.

"I'm here, and I'm not leaving you," Karl said confidently, giving the curling vines a death stare. He pulled his friend up from him, holding his cold and anxious face in his hands and making sure he was alright. "Let's get out of here."

"Karl, Sapnap—"

"I know, Gogy, I know," – he swallowed hard, trying to push down the oncoming tears – "but he's made it clear that he's not coming back with us."

The bitter truth hurt him as much as it seemed to hurt George, who lowered his gaze. Somehow, his cheeks had grown even colder.

"Come on," Karl urged, dropping his arms. He held his friend's hand tightly – so tightly that he thought he'd break it – and tried to drag them both towards the door.

The Egg definitely didn't like that. It tried to trip them up whenever it could, but Karl began to realize that its attempts were becoming weaker and weaker to do so. Most of the charred vines remained motionless as they passed them by.

Now the only true threats they had to worry about was the bloody battle raging all around them, and the fire itself, spreading quickly and deadly.

Dodging swords, axes and makeshift weapons was harder on the way back than it had been on the way to, especially now he had most of his mind focused on keeping George safe and sound. Karl had almost been impaled twice, and the path he dragged them along changed at every turn. Even the flames seemed to be everywhere, hiding around every corner and blanketing every single space they trod on.

"Karl! The walls!" yelled George, and Karl obeyed, veering them around another duel and pulling them to the outskirts of the cave.

Karl's fingers were just about to brush the rock when suddenly, someone was shoved up against it, almost crushing his arm in the process. Immediately, he yanked George away, and they stumbled backwards in a frenzy.

There was a loud cry of pain as the figure's spine was mercilessly thrown against the sharp stone edges, followed by an ear-piercing yowl as a beast leapt on top of them, claws up and aimed for the other's eyes.

The first figure grabbed the others paws, furiously trying to keep the swings away from their neck and their eyes, then gave their attacker a sharp kick to the stomach.

It threw the beast off balance, and was just enough to allow them to get the upper hand.

Karl watched with an open mouth, his heart racing. At first, it was because of the shock. The second time too, actually, was also due to shock, although it was for something else than almost having his hand's bones reduced to dust.

It was...

Karl almost wept with joy.

Despite the fine – albeit a little torn and bloody – evening clothes he wore, the slightly longer hair that was tied back and the myriad of scratch marks littering his exposed skin, Karl would recognize those blackened eyes anywhere.

His vision about Pandora's Vault had been a chilling one and after hearing the full story of the actual events, a tragic one too. Tragic, or so Karl had been led to believe.

When all the ailments of the world escaped Pandora's box, only one thing remained behind, locked up tight: Hope.

The Hope locked inside Pandora's Vault had returned, fighting valiantly in front of Karl's very eyes. The Hope, that was said to be dead, was alive.

Alive.

"Is that..." George breathed beside him, sounding just as flabbergasted as Karl was.

The Warden was alive.

Finally, a shred of happiness had been restored, a single reprieve in years' worth of painful prophecies, and in a moment of helplessness, Karl felt his strength swell up inside of him.

"It is," he replied, grinning. "He's alive, George."

Antfrost twisted to the side, pouncing to his feet once again and lunging. Sam dodged the attack by a mere hair's length, and kicked some of the flaming thorns into the cat's pelt. In the split moment where Ant was distracted, Sam tried to run.

The universe had listened, and the universe had finally been clement with someone's fate. Karl looked up at the cavern roof, sending his thanks through the layers of stone and earth weighing down on top of him, and up into the starry sky beyond.

The tendrils snaking across the cavern roof were shriveling up in front of his very eyes, using their last remaining strength to tear down small bits of their perch as they went. Before long, a tempest of flaming rocks pelted down upon him, arrows of hell that tore at his skin.

Karl wasn't quick enough to avoid them.

His eyes widened as the blazing debris grew closer and closer to his upturned face.

"Karl!"

Something jagged and heavy hit his vision, and a white-hot pain cut through his eyeballs. He felt his knees buckle and hit the ground, his world a blur.

Karl Jacobs screamed.

"You!" sneered a voice, followed by the furious thunder of armoured footsteps.

A blade crashed down beside her feet and she leapt away, almost falling backwards off the edge of the table.

After regaining her footing, she quickly faced her attacker, just barely avoiding another one of his brutal swings.

"I'm going to tear you to shreds!"

Punz held his sword high above his head, ready to bring it down upon her and slice her into two, clean halves.

Puffy let out a small bleat of terror, then reached for the first thing she could get her hands on and threw it at the crazed mercenary's face.

The jugful of dark red wine drenched him and his immaculate white suit from head to toe. He spluttered, eyes screwed shut, and gave her just enough time to safely get down from the table and grab something, anything she could use to defend herself. She settled on a shining silver platter that had been discarded by one of the waiters earlier

on, holding it in front of her like a shield – just in time, it seemed, as the wine was bound to only stall Punz for a mere moment.

"You killed my brother!"

His heavy netherite blade clashed with the platter, leaving a brutal indent. Puffy stumbled backwards, tripping over the charred remains of a thick vine. It crunched and disintegrated underhoof like a pile of dry autumn leaves.

"He would have grown into a strong warrior, and you had to cut that short!"

Punz lunged again, and she barely escaped by the skin of her teeth.

He stopped and brushed a hand over his eyes, wiping away the few drops of wine that still ran down his forehead and cheeks.

"He was my only family," he growled, "you heartless bitch! You know nothing of pain, so let me fucking well show you what it feels like!"

Captain Puffy had left her home at a young age, younger than she should have been, and hadn't seen her beloved family since.

She had given life to and loved a beautiful little lamb, and had subsequently been forced to give him up.

She had lost her ship, her precious cargo and her entire crew to the stormy, treacherous waters just off the coast of the SMP. On clear days, if she took the time to look closely, she could still see the tip of the frayed, broken mast peek up above the waves – a constant reminder of a tragedy she had been too powerless to prevent.

She had fought in bloody wars. She had watched her son grow up without her. She had lost many friends to betrayals, to death or to the Egg.

Her own, beating and loving heart had been broken not once, but twice – and if she allowed herself to continue down the path it was urging her to take, she felt like a third time would be imminent.

She had been there when Tommy was buried; when Ranboo's treachery was brought to light; when Purpled had breathed his last life away; when Tubbo had briefly died in her arms.

And she had been there when Dream had carried out the bloody trident that had slaughtered her dearest companion.

How dare Punz say she knew nothing of pain, of suffering.

He was the one who needed to know what helplessness truly was.

Puffy anchored her hooves into the uneven, waving ground, and threw the platter at Punz's head. It hit him square on with a bang, distracting him just long enough for Puffy to grab a nearby meat cleaver from a discarded roast and lunge at him, its blade still dripping with thick juices and gravy.

"I have been through more than your privileged, entitled little ass ever will!"

Weapons clashed once again, although this time it was clear who was winning. For the first time since she had seen him in battle, the mercenary was very obviously losing ground.

Puffy gave Punz a sharp kick to his stomach and he reeled back, clutching the nearby tablecloth to stay balanced. More plates and platters fell to the ground.

"Don't think you can talk to me about suffering!"

Tearing his mask off his face, she trailed the point of her knife just below his chin. Gods, she had never seen him so powerless.

"And don't pretend like you ever saw Purpled as anything but a weapon."

That was perhaps the worst thing she could have said, and the biggest mistake to make. Punz's horrified glare froze over, mouth twisted into a snarl. His free hand shot up and clamped itself around her neck, squeezing it tightly and cutting off her air. She dropped her weapon and flailed around, desperately trying to claw at the fingers threatening to tear out her throat.

Punz shoved her backwards effortlessly, her body growing weaker and limper and unable to anything apart from bend to his control. It was only a matter of moments before she felt her back crash against the burning, pulsating tendrils of a pillar, Punz caging her small body between himself and the furious, screeching Egg.

A tangle of thorns the size of dragon's claws snagged her dress, and she winced at the unmistakable sound of ripping material.

Punz's hand was still wrapped around her neck, threatening to snap it if the absence of oxygen didn't get to her first. She could do nothing but thrash around and squirm, hoping that his grip would somehow slacken.

It didn't.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," the mercenary snarled. "Save everyone a good deal of trouble. Someone needs to put traitors like you back in their place."

Puffy couldn't even reply, every one of her words suffocated by the claws that choked her. A dark fog began to rim her vision, growing thicker by the second. She jerked her body again, trying to catch someone, anyone's attention.

Technoblade, whose war cries and booming fireworks shook the cavern and vibrated through the vines pressed against her.

Nikki and Sapnap, who she had glimpsed running around the cave together and leaving a trail of flames and screams behind them.

Ranboo, also scrambling around the venue and trying to help anyone he could get out alive, including heavily injured members of the Eggpire.

Sam, fighting somewhere.

Sam.

Sam!

None came to help her, all that filled her vision being Punz's fury twisting his face with hate.

"Here's what I'm going to do," he hissed, dragging his blade up and over her body. Any harder and he'd be breaking her skin, drawing blood. She couldn't stop herself from trembling violently. "I'm going to gouge your pretty little eyes out of your head. Then, I'll make you watch as I peel the flesh from your bones layer by layer until you're screaming louder than the fucking Egg itself. Then..."

He went on and on, but Puffy was barely registering his words. The fog had continued to close in on her vision, inky and black, and everything was fading rapidly. Her muscles relaxed until she couldn't feel them anymore, her body no more but that of a ragdoll.

Her eyelids still tried to fight the incoming darkness, yet they too were growing heavier and heavier. Once closed, she was certain that she'd never open them again.

Someone suddenly swooped over and towards her with a screech – the Grim Reaper coming to take her away, no doubt. They landed somewhere behind Punz, framing his bright figure with dark, obsidian wings.

"Youngsters these days," a familiar voice tutted, "they don't know how to treat a lady."

Punz's grip on her neck finally let go as he was violently yanked away. Puffy fell to the floor, scratching her hands on the Egg's thorns and pressing her soothing touch to her throat. She coughed, trying to chase away the feeling of the mercenary's fingers and his choking hold. The darkness faded and with weakened legs and a fuzzy head, she looked over at her savior.

Philza was towering above Punz, who had been unceremoniously shoved on his back under him, and had one foot on his chest. His wings beat angrily, blasting a warm breeze filled with ashes into Puffy's face.

"I'm sure my own will have something to say about that," the avian said to his victim, with the teasingly condescending tone of a disapproving parent. "Perhaps you should meet her yourself..."

He pressed his foot down harder on the struggling man's chest, and the captain watched Punz squirm, helpless. For a brief moment, Phil looked up at her, smiled, and drew the foil sheathed around his waist. He flung it at her, and despite her dizzy state, she deftly caught it in mid-air and staggered to her feet.

"Might help a bit," Philza said to her, winking, then immediately turning back to Punz as the mercenary abruptly regained his former strength and shoved the avian off his feet.

Puffy made her escape swiftly, the sounds of the Angel of Death and the crazed man tearing at each other still echoing in her mind once she was well away. She ducked behind a flaming pillar, trying to get her bearings. The Egg's screeching didn't make it any easier.

Her throat was still rough and aching, she had sustained a good number of bruises on her arms and legs. The hem of her dress was now completely gone, replaced instead by a jagged tear reaching from her right knee down to just above her left ankle. The blue flames around her continued to lick at anything flammable, burning dark, ugly holes in

what used to be her beautiful, satin and crimson gown. Blood and wine mixed, staining what remained with dark, uneven spots.

She tore off her mask, sourly casting it aside as she realized that from looking and being treated like a queen, she was reduced back into her role as a traitor, a vagabond, a pirate. It began to smoulder in a corner, the cold and light blue withering away into black and grey, and then into nothingness.

Puffy grasped the hilt of Philza's sword, urging her cramping hand to keep holding on through gritted teeth. She was so unsteady, however, that she had to use both hands, forcing her fingers to squeeze so tightly she was worried they would snap like twigs. The golden crow's head on the pommel stared at her over her wrist, dark engraved eyes judging her every move, her every decision.

She peered out from behind her hiding place, stifling a gasp at the scene she finally got to take in fully.

There was to be no bloodshed, Technoblade had said to them all. No bloodshed, and no messes. It seemed that the piglin was the first to throw those promises out of the window.

Bodies and still-writhing shards of the Egg littered the floor, burned beyond recognition or just starting to get licked by sparks and embers. A few of the fallen still moved, starting to recover from their lost lives and desperately trying to cling to those they had left. The lucky few were helped to their feet by brave volunteers – including Ranboo – who then ushered them towards the exit and out of the warzone.

Others lay motionless, and they were carried out too with decidedly a lot more wails and shrieks of pain. Even the tendrils that draped their corpses were dead and burned to a crisp.

On top of the graveyard, the battle raged on, opposing the Eggpire and Puffy's own friends. Then again, now she could take the time to look closer, she soon realized that Technoblade and his team weren't the only ones locked in a bloody frenzy. Other guests she had seen that evening had joined the scuffle too on their side, using whatever they could to fight back the Egg's maniacal disciples. Her heart swelled with pride, her faith in the SMP's inhabitants restored as many had chosen to fight for the good cause, even if that meant siding with less-than appreciated warriors like Technoblade.

Puffy also noticed that Bad was nowhere to be found.

Spurts of blood, silver and netherite blades, and firework rockets flew everywhere she looked, painting the burning room with an array of colours. Every bang and cry shook the cave walls, rattling the tons of earth weighing down above them all and the snuffed out light fittings still hanging from the ceilings.

The captain's eyes briefly darted to the large, unlit shadow of the imposing chandelier that hung right over the dance floor. She had a terrible feeling pool in her stomach when she imagined what would happen if it ever fell. The occasional shake of its fixtures and the tremble of its thousands of crystal garlands only made her nightmare worse.

To crown it all off, the blue fire was everywhere, constantly hissing and spitting, burning everything in its path.

She dragged her eyes down to the crystals' glittering shadows scattered across the smooth wooden ground, appearing and disappearing and changing colour with every bright firework that burst beside them.

The world under the chandelier was only crossed by frantic guests rushing to get out, escaping the oncoming flames and the few healthy tendrils that still tried to lock limbs between their slimy bodies.

Only two figures lingered around that vicinity, their own battle taking place directly underneath the shaking chandelier.

The exact place where Puffy had shared a beautiful dance earlier that evening, one that despite everything, had made her heart fuller, was now the spot where a hurricane had been whipped up among the flames, two creatures mercilessly tearing at each other's flesh and bones.

Puffy couldn't drag her eyes away, transfixed by the scene. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't, ever-growing horror rooting her to the spot.

Horror, and a fear so great it was starting to choke her, as hard and as brutal as Punz's previous grip on her throat – and yet it was not terror for herself, rather for one of the two fighters.

For both of them, of course, because no matter what evil force had possessed the feline, he was still a dear friend. But it was especially for the one she had forced her heart to stop yearning for – it never listened, however, and she had been caught in a dilemma ever since.

Now, seeing him so close to being slaughtered, something jolted through her, drawing a sudden and high-pitched sob from her poor, abused throat.

She had lost him once, and she would never do so again.

Her hands closed back around the crow's head grip of the sword, and her right senses left her.

One moment she was running, hooves pounding across the wood, the next she had thrust the foil deep into Antfrost's back, holding it still as a life leaked out onto her hand in dark red streams.

Chapter Sixty-Four: Our Saviors

Time itself seemed to freeze in its tracks.

Then Puffy blinked, and it all came crashing down.

Finally taking note of the red rivers running down her fingers and arms, she pulled back abruptly, taking the sword with her. It slid effortlessly out of Antfrost's back, and the cat slumped down to the floor. There was a cry of shock from underneath, and the body was rolled over and away.

Puffy dropped her weapon, and then she dropped to her knees. She clutched her stomach with her bloody hands, suddenly feeling it wrench and writhe with the horror of what she had just done. She couldn't see anything but red – red blood, red cat, red floor beneath the cat that spread by the second.

She couldn't feel anything – not the blue flames singeing her dress and legs, not the soft but shaking hands that touched her arm.

Oh gods, she didn't mean to... She was just trying to...

"Antfrost...?" she called hesitantly.

Antfrost didn't answer. He didn't move.

She reached for him, panic taking over. "Antfrost—!"

"Puffy, breathe," someone said, reeling her back in and wrapping a pair of strong arms around her.

The captain still tried to reach the cat's body. "I need to make sure he's alright, let me go, I need to—"

She was slurring her words and rambling nonsense, all while trying to escape her shackles. They held her firmly, and she squirmed even more.

"Breathe," the voice said again, holding her close, "just breathe for me, please..."

She hadn't realized that she had been holding in so much air, and how much it made her head spin and ache. She tried to find comfort in Sam's touch.

Breathe...

All the rage she had felt vanished, turning into mind-numbing terror.

Breathe...

She had done the unthinkable. She had slain Antfrost.

Breathe...

He was a friend, and she had killed him.

Breathe...

She had killed her friend.

"What have you done?!"

Someone ran up to them and crouched down beside Antfrost, starting to roll him right and left in an effort to wake him up.

Puffy's shackles quickly became her only shield, the only thing willing enough to shelter her.

"Velvet, no," Sam interrupted, "it was me, I'm to blame—"

"She *killed* him!"

Puffy looked up, just long enough to see Velvet's tear-filled, glistening eyes sharpened with a hate she had never seen before. She wanted to say something, anything, but he turned his face away and hid it in the deceased's matted fur.

"He's still breathing, it's alright," Sam said aloud. "His lives are taking care of the rest."

That didn't change anything.

"Darling, look at me."

She couldn't, and even less since he actually cared about her. She felt icky and filthy, soiled with blood, rage, and a crime she had never wanted to commit. She was a monster, and yet...

"You did nothing wrong, okay? None of this is your fault."

It's all my fault.

"I..." She gulped. "I didn't want to lose you..."

"And neither do I," Sam replied, holding her closer and closer. "I'm here, I swear. I'm here, and I'm not leaving."

After a tumultuous and arduous journey through the tangled jungle of screaming banshees, Tommy's troglodyte home came into view. They ducked inside with minimal scratches and bruises.

Tommy didn't even bother to close the door, nevermind lock it. Tubbo was convinced that he had gone absolutely insane. Not only that, he hadn't even told him what the heck they were about to do. Now, seeing his best friend with his head buried in a chest like a spindly-legged ostrich, he was only more confused.

"Tommy?"

"Hm?"

"What are—"

"For fuck's sake, just get in here and help me!"

The urgency and sharpness of his tone startled Tubbo, and he quickly dropped to his knees beside him. He still had no idea what to do, though.

"Try and find anything we could turn into a torch, or set fire to."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

Tommy scrambled to his feet and heaved open a trapdoor in the floor. He began to clamber down through the opening, giving Tubbo a brief but insistent look before he disappeared completely.

The ram wasted no time in throwing off his winter coat and rolling up his shirt sleeves. He began to rummage through the chest, pulling out random items and tossing them aside.

Gods above, Tommy was as messy as he had always been, and even his chests were out of control! It made Tubbo's skin crawl.

Propaganda badges emblazoned with the POG political party logo mixed with crumbs of rotting food and unidentified specks of grime. It smelled awful too. Along with the stench, there were a number of random, broken trinkets and precious ores that Tommy often tried to pitifully swindle off everyone else, using his so-called "poverty" to his advantage. Only Sam and Puffy had ever been dumb enough to comply, everyone else simply had doubts.

Tubbo had half a mind to call Tommy out on his scam and catch him in the lie red-handed, but his best friend's order was a lot more pressing.

He rummaged some more and managed to unearth a collection of sticks, along with a decent amount of tattered and torn clothes clearly forgotten and unwanted.

Tubbo set to work, tearing and tying strips of fabric onto the wood. He soon managed to amass an impressive amount of makeshift torches, and in such little time too.

It was just like his few days in Pogtopia: cross-legged on the hard floor, working around the clock on borrowed time. The only things missing would have been Tommy's carefree attitude and rude jokes, and Wilbur's poetic yet haunting ramblings echoing from somewhere in the ravine.

In an effort to chase away the memories, he let his mind wander to the task at hand.

What was Tommy planning?

He picked up one of the finished torches and tossed it from hand to hand. Logically, torches meant light, but Tommy was Tommy: surely he wasn't going to suggest lighting up the paths? Surely he wasn't going to act *sensibly* for once?

Then again, Tubbo knew that his best friend had changed in many ways. Who was to say that Tommy *hadn't* decided to take Tubbo's suggestions into account.

"Thomas," Tubbo called out loud, attempting to drown out the tendrils' screams muffled by the dull dirt walls, "you better get your ass up here and tell me exactly what you're thinking of doing!"

"Wait a fucking second, geez," came a whine from somewhere underneath the ram's feet.

Tubbo gave the ground a good, hard kick, smugly twitching his ears when a string of curse words rose up through the trapdoor. "Get up here right now, or I'll cave in your basement."

A second later, Tommy clambered back up the ladder with a heavy box in his arms. "Fuck you," he muttered, shaking earth and dust out of his hair.

"Information first, apologies later."

"We're going to light up the paths."

"You're taking my idea," Tubbo noted with a smile.

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Well, it's not exactly on the same level as setting off a nuclear warhead. I know you would have preferred a plan like that."

"Yeah, well, something tells me that the violence tonight isn't going to be of our doing."

"You're taking a peaceful stance."

"That's what I just said."

"Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?"

Tommy set the box down on the floor, rubbing his sore red hands together. He cast a sideways glance to the pile of torches and frowned, "We don't have enough to light the whole path."

"The *whole* path?!" Tubbo's jaw dropped. "You want to light up the *entire* Prime Path?!"

It was an admirable plan for sure, but a gargantuan feat in perspective. When Tubbo suggested they should light it, he just meant a few lamps here and there, maybe hung onto the surrounding buildings. But the entire path... They definitely didn't have enough things to make torches out of and even if they did, the Egg's growths were another obstacle they had to consider.

"Just up to Eret's castle," Tommy replied, crouching down in front of the box, "but I don't think we'll even get a quarter of the way there. The Red Banquet is being held in the Badlands, right?"

"Yeah?"

"They started building a road that connects to the main path. It's not completely finished, but it's used. If we light up the junction, all the people will have to do is follow to find it. We could even lend them a torch or two to find their way home after that."

"But it's a huge event," Tubbo pointed out. "There'll be so many people. We might not have enough to light the exit *and* give out!"

"We're not going to use them to light the junction. We're using *these* instead."

He opened the box. Tubbo froze.

Inside, arranged in orderly lines, lay some firework rockets. Rolled up in colourful striped paper, topped with a paper cap and ended with a thick fuse.

Fireworks.

It made perfect sense. After all, what could brighten up a sky more than a myriad of sparkling, shining colours—

"Tubbo?"

His stomach hurt. His head hurt. His burn scars hurt. He sat down.

"Tubbo?" Tommy repeated.

"We could go to the nearest forest and cut down some branches, and there's still enough fabric to make plenty more torches—"

"Tubbo..."

He ran a hand through his hair, letting his fringe fall in front of his eyes. "We could find some lanterns somewhere, I bet. Then that'll be more than enough to—"

"Tubbo!"

The ram fell silent, but he didn't look up. He pursed his lips and hid his burns.

"You're not okay with this, are you?"

Tubbo didn't say anything.

"I, um... This is about what happened at the Red Festival, isn't it?"

Tubbo didn't say anything.

A sigh. "Listen, I'm really bad when it comes to the crappy comforting shit, but..."

A hand landed on Tubbo's shoulder.

"I know what you're feeling. Watching Technoblade and Schlatt that day and being powerless to do anything about it... Losing you then was the worst moment of my life, and I never want to go through something like that again."

Tubbo didn't say anything, but he looked up. Tommy was staring down at the ground, his gaze vacant. He wiped his nose on his arm with a big sniff, and Tubbo thought he saw a small tear run down his chin.

"This isn't about me or you, though. This is to save people."

Ranboo, Puffy.

"Fireworks are the best way to do this."

Yes, they were.

"You don't have to come along if you don't want to. You can stay here and no one will think any less of you."

Tubbo would think so much less of himself but Tommy was right, this wasn't about him. This was about helping people, people he loved. And if he was going to get over his fear at some point, now was better than never, right?

"I'll do it," he decided, springing up from his spot on the floor. He balled his hands into fists. "I'll do it."

Tommy leapt up beside him with a relieved laugh, "That's the spirit!"

"I have only one condition though," Tubbo said, serious once again.

"What is it?"

"You don't bloody well point them towards my face!"

Sapnap hadn't had the chance to completely let off some steam – both in the literal and metaphorical sense – in quite a while and although he hated to admit it, arson was it. Anything and everything, as long as he could watch them smoulder until there would be nothing left but ashes, and once those ashes were carried off by the breeze, so would his anger.

He hadn't had the chance to use that outlet in so long without feeling somewhat guilty but now, after being given full permission by Technoblade, he was having perhaps a little too much fun with his job that evening.

As he sped around the cavern with Nikki and her chandelier, both his hands and the whole of his body on fire, he inhaled the smoke and drank up the bright blue, scorched surroundings.

The flaming blue bouquets of flowers, the silk drapes lining the walls flapping and roaring, the fiery tracks on the ground and the Egg's ear-piercing screams – everything only fuelled his pyre.

And he had to admit, getting everything out alongside another arsonist certainly added an extra thrill to the whole experience.

Sapnap was careful, however, and consistently grounded himself with many sane thoughts. If he truly lost himself that evening it would be a much different story, and a much more dangerous outcome.

He didn't want to turn into Dream.

"I told you your dress would burn," he teased Nikki triumphantly as she tore down a flaming flag from the rock face and threw it into another pile of tendrils.

She shot him a murderous look, yet still unable to hide the spark of amusement that lit up her face. "Might want to look at yourself in the mirror then," she lashed back.

Oh, Sapnap was well aware of what he looked like, with his ignited skin, burning shirt and the eerie white mask that still concealed half of his face. He looked terrifying, like an angel of Hell risen to wreak absolute havoc, a phantom of the Nether. He relished in it.

They shared another grin, and parted ways to continue their task at hand.

"Sapnap!"

The fireborn spun around at the yell of his name. Nikki was too far away now to ask her to wait for him.

He squinted into the crowd and the blazing blue bonfire, trying to find the source of the voice.

"Sapnap, quick!"

There it was again, this time belonging to a tall, lanky figure he only recognized too well, sprinting across the floor in pure terror. The fireborn quickly slipped on his gloves back on just before Ranboo grabbed him.

"Easy there, what's wrong?" Sapnap asked him. "You're supposed to be getting everyone out!"

"I was, but then... I..."

His breathing started getting shorter and sharper. His hands flew to his hair, shaking and tugging at his locks. Streams of dark blood were trickling down his sleeve, and he winced whenever he moved his hand.

Sapnap immediately reached out to the hybrid.

"I'm fine," Ranboo panted, tilting his bloodied wrist away. "It just got caught in a tendril, I'm sure it's fine..."

He sounded much less certain, and much more pained.

"Ranb—"

"I'll survive, just let it go."

"Then why did you come and find me?"

"It's not about me, it's Karl!"

"Karl? What about him?"

"He's... Sapnap, I think he's—"

Sapnap took off. He didn't even wait for a full answer: Karl's name combined with the urgency of Ranboo's tone told him everything he needed to know. Karl was somewhere in the blazing cavern, injured – or maybe even dead.

The fireborn charged through the battle, his whole body ablaze. His flames charred anything they brushed, licking the edges of his mask, and the mere shoves of his shoulders sent jolts of piping hot, searing pain through every fighter he pushed past. His eyes kept searching, scanning the carnage for Karl, or anyone that could lead him to his whereabouts.

"Sapnap!"

"George!"

The fireborn spun around and ran towards the source of his best friend's voice. George met him halfway, stretching out his arms for a long awaited and much needed hug – he only stopped himself when a particularly nasty flame flared up and lashed out towards him like a snake.

"Where's Karl?" Sapnap asked, frantic.

"Over here," George replied, yanking him towards a secluded part of the venue.

A figure was huddled up in a corner, shaking and covering his face with his hands. Sapnap's worry increased tenfold and almost as suddenly as his body had been lit, it extinguished until all that was left were the ashen, crisp remains of his shirt and the dark grey smoke curling off his shoulders.

"What happened?!"

"We were trying to get out... but the fire... it—"

The fire. *Sapnap's* fire.

Dread quickly began to consume him, and he knelt down beside the shaking body. The soft silk clothes, the dusty brown hair, the fair, perfect skin; it was all so familiar, and the fireborn wanted to litter kisses over every inch.

"Baby, can you hear me?"

The shaking suddenly stopped. Karl tensed up at the nickname. Sapnap stayed put, gloved hands hovering nervously near him, still not daring to touch him without some sort of sign.

"S... Sapnap...?"

The fireborn immediately clamped his hands around the other's wrists, and gently began to draw them down from his head. Karl resisted ever so slightly, whimpering, but Sapnap silently and carefully insisted.

"Karl, please look at me."

"I can't..."

Finally, the last couple of inches of his fingers were lowered, and nothing obstructed Sapnap's view of his face. And his face...

Sapnap choked on his own smoke.

In stark, worrying contrast to his hands and neck, Karl's face was peppered with dark red gnashes and boils. The skin over his nose and around his eyes was raw and peeling off, sprinkled with charcoal black freckles. His grey eyes stared forward, right at Sapnap, but they didn't look right.

Something was off about them, very off.

"I can't see you," Karl whispered softly, blinking far too normally and idly for comfort.

The fireborn was paralyzed. With a trembling hand, he thumbed the oilskin gloves over the burns, gradually drifting up to his eyes. Their sclera were red and raw, and the irises

smokier than they used to be. Even the pupils seemed to have evaporated into thin air, leaving behind a moderately dark hole that melted into the rest.

"You can't see me," Sapnap echoed, trying to push down his tears.

Karl's head shook slightly, then leaned into the fireborn's warm, gloved palm. "But I can feel you."

That meant nothing. Karl couldn't see anything, and Sapnap was to blame.

"George, give me your coat," he ordered to his best friend, holding out his hand.

He felt the garment being handed over with a brief hesitation and he immediately got to work, desperate to get his mind off the culpability that would only drag him down. He began to hack at the sky blue fabric until he tore a decently long strip. He then tied it around Karl's forehead, covering his eyes – and thus the irreversible damage he had inflicted on them. All his thoughts of arson evaporated.

"We're getting out of here," Sapnap decided, picking up Karl's body in his strong hold and hoisting him up into his arms.

George, who had been watching the scene unfold in complete silence, joined his side and together, they began raced towards the door.

All the way, Sapnap tried to focus on his footing, on the raging battle that the Eggpire was clearly losing, on their plan's success, but Karl's weight against his chest only brought his mind full circle, back to the horror.

I did this, he kept screaming to himself, I did this, I did this—

In the midst of everything, another noise could be heard. It was faint and easy to brush aside as a byproduct of Techno's fireworks or the incessantly screeching Egg, but Philza heard it loud and clear.

He was old, but he was far from deaf yet.

The avian looked hurriedly up at the ceiling, securely pinning Punz underneath his foot and one of his wings. The mercenary struggled, sniffing through a broken and bloody nose, but was kept firmly to the ground like a rabbit in a falcon's talons.

Phil continued to watch the burning, flaking tendrils across the ceiling, taking a brief moment to admire the success of their plan. His elation only faltered when he began to realize that the burning of those particular growths was the worst thing to occur that evening.

The vines that had spread across the rocks clung onto the roughly mined ridges and tangled in every direction. They were a complete bird's nest of a mess, and yet they all clearly regrouped towards the same point: the center of the cavern's ceiling.

And hanging from that center point, held up by the knotting tendrils, was the magnificent and gargantuan chandelier.

The staggering centerpiece that had burned all night with thousands upon thousands of candles, casting a golden glow over the world underneath and occasionally chiming into the evening with the gentle jangling of its hundreds of crystal ornaments, disturbed by the cavern breeze.

What acted as the glittering crown of the ballroom floor had since been plunged into the same obscurity as the rest of the venue, the only light illuminating it now being the light blue fires that menacingly licked their way towards it. The crystal pieces continued to rub against one another, but this time in anticipation and fear. The dark, imposing shadow swayed ominously from side to side.

As he looked closer, Philza began to realize that the tendrils – the muscles of its support – were beginning to shrivel up and slip from their perches, starting to reveal the only other thing keeping the chandelier up: a small hook drilled into the rock above. A spider-like collection of cracks were already starting to form, only getting bigger and more prominent whenever another tendril disintegrated.

Philza abandoned his fight with Punz without a second thought, taking to the skies and darting towards the danger head on. As the chandelier grew closer, he began to realize how serious the situation really was. With every second that passed, it seemed to jerk lower and lower, threatening to take the entire roof and ground above with it.

The avian looped through the ornate branches until he could find a big enough space to squeeze through, and pressed his back to the cold, gold metal.

Like Atlas, Phil made sure to hold the entire world on his back, and one single slip could send it crashing to the floor on top of all the poor souls unfortunate enough to not have escaped yet.

His wings beat furiously, trying desperately to hoist the fixture up higher and attempting to lighten its weight on him. His back was killing him after only a few moments, and the chandelier continued to force him down. The cracks continued to break up the stone, sending bigger and bigger chunks tumbling down below.

Let it go, the Egg ordered him through its screams of immense pain. *Let it fall*.

Philza had been hearing the Egg for a while, although he had never said so. Ever since he had first laid eyes on it, it had been there, inside his mind and trying to order him around. *Trying*, of course, because Philza was sane enough to resist it, somewhat. There were slip ups, but no more.

It was most definitely full of some fine, silk-woven bullshit.

With his remaining strength, Philza began to yell at the top of his lungs.

"Everyone get out, now!"

"We need to move," Sam suddenly blurted out, his eyes glued upwards, "now!"

Puffy followed his gaze, even as he grabbed her firmly and tried to drag her away. Not too high above them, the chandelier hung in shaking suspension, held up only by a single angel with dark wings. Philza looked so small and weak compared to the lights pressing against his back and the cracks that crisscrossed the ceiling. He was only going to last a few more moments before it dropped... right onto the spot they were crouched on.

Finding her voice again, she nodded and gathered up the remaining rags of the hem of her dress. "Now!" she agreed, leaping to her feet.

It seemed like Phil's cry had been heard by everyone, fighting or not. The cries of war from the remaining people present became shouts of fear, and animosity was quickly abandoned in favour of a speedy escape. Shards and the smouldering, ashen remains of the sky-high growths fell to the floor, dousing the escape underneath with a fiery rain worthy of the gods' anger itself.

"We can't leave Ant, Sam!" Velvet's high, whimpering voice cried out, stabbing Puffy with more guilt. He held the cat's body close to him, even as the blood continued to spill. "We can't leave—"

"We're not going to!"

Puffy felt Sam let go of her arm and saw him crouch down beside the corpse. He rolled his sleeves up to his elbow and hoisted Antfrost's body into his arms. He did so relatively easily, which was worrying. Puffy knew Sam was strong, but that was definitely not the reason. It was as if every drop of blood the cat lost took a good deal of mass away with them.

"Get to the exit!" Sam then yelled to anyone who would listen to him.

Before long, he, Puffy and Velvet had joined the crowd still trying to get out, struggling against each other and the growths barricading the door. Even in the midst of its agony, the Egg was still trying to keep whoever it could locked in, to burn with it in its pyre. The screams from everyone, growths and guests alike, ensued tenfold.

If the Egg was going it down, it was going to take everyone down with it.

Thankfully, it was weakened enough for a few, precise jabs and swings to break through the jungle and clear the way.

"My gods, are you both alright?!"

A heavy build of fur and muscle abruptly yanked Puffy away from Sam and held her close. Fighting to free her head to avoid getting smothered, she looked up to see Technoblade, soaked in and reeking of blood, gunpowder and sweat. He was in the same state as she was, although he seemed to bask in it while all she wanted to do was scream.

She nodded as quickly as she could.

"You're bleeding," he grunted, staring down at her tattered, stained dress.

"It's not mine."

Her voice was shaking, and she almost forgot what she was there to do, where she was running. It wasn't her blood, but she certainly wished it was.

"Is it Sam's?"

"It... could have been, if I didn't get there in time..."

She was pulled against his chest, to her surprise, and given a good, long hug. "It's collateral damage," he said, "don't beat yourself up about it."

Collateral damage. That was one way to put it.

She was about to put him right on that one and call out his insensitive comment, only to remember who she was talking to.

Blood for the Blood God, I guess.

"Puffy, Techno!"

They turned their heads towards the shout, spying Sam waiting for them by the threshold. Ant's body still hung from his grasp, tail and ears drooping.

Making sure he wasn't going to drop the cat, he reached one of his hands out, urging them towards him.

Puffy didn't move at first, only heading out when Technoblade gave her a good, frantic shove.

"Come on, or we'll burn," Sam said in a soft tone.

That was a contrast and a half from the chaos around them. Even his grip on her own hand seemed lighter and gentler than it perhaps should have been in that situation. Her arm brushed something silky and soft, and unable to stop herself, she looked down. Antfrost's blood had now soaked most of his chest, sticking the fur into clumps and collecting grime.

She couldn't stomach the sight.

I did that.

She swallowed hard, and yanked her hand away from him.

"Puffy?" Sam called again, clearly unable to hide the fact that he was very much taken aback.

Puffy didn't even turn to take one last look at the cavern, too shaken to care about anything else but what she had done. The blood splattered up her body started to weigh heavily, stiff and sticky and threatening to drag her down.

She looked up at Sam again, who was still acting far too gently and calmly for her liking. She had just killed someone – not only that, a friend! – for little to no reason, and all he could do was comfort her. She pushed past him and continued walking.

Gods, I love you, she sighed as the cold night wind began to leak through the crowd, *but I'm starting to wonder if you're more trouble than you're worth.*

"Phil! Leave it!"

The avian opened his eyes, head reeling after screwing them tight for so long. Reality began to sink in again, especially for his bones and muscles that shook and ached from the sheer weight of the chandelier abusing them.

Far below him, Technoblade was calling him with huge gestures, attempting to get his attention. Well, he certainly had it, but Philza still didn't allow himself to move.

"Techno, is everyone out?" he yelled back. His wings missed a beat. The chandelier fell a couple of inches lower.

"Phil, we don't have time to—"

"Techno!"

"Yes, yes they are!"

The piglin's reply was hurried, and lacked the honest conviction Phil needed to hear to believe him. However, his body had begun to tire long ago and at any moment, he felt like he was going to drop to the floor like a dead crow.

"Open the door!" he ordered, and after using the rest of his strength to hoist the fixture off him, he dove to the ground.

The blue flames that carpeted the cave completely, now undisturbed by passing feet and growing higher, kitten-licked the tip of his wings and his stomach as he skimmed over them. A goodbye, or perhaps a final attempt at claiming a victim.

Phil almost hit Techno when he crash landed on the steps behind him, the cold night air a blessing to his sweating, burning body. He briefly kissed the floor that he missed so dearly, then turned to his best friend.

"Come on mate," he said, lightheaded, "I thought we were getting out of here!"

"Oh, we are – just give me a moment."

Technoblade loaded his crossbow with another one of his – seemingly endless – rockets, and pointed it back into the cave. The avian took the opportunity to give the Red Banquet one last look.

The rich, velvet world that they had entered at the start of that evening, crimson and dazzling, was no more. Fire latched on to every surface, turning the gold and red surroundings into blue and silver, and replacing the waltzes and gavottes on the dancefloor with a burning ballet worthy of that name. The tendrils and flowers had all shrivelled up to a crisp, the once vibrant and living world now stiff and very much dead. Ashen flakes continued to drift down to the floor like burning snow, the final confetti of that evening's party.

And sitting far against the back wall, sticking out like a sore, bloody thumb, was the Egg. It still screamed and screeched, thrashing the few vines and tendrils it still had left. It was almost as if it was calling for help, failing like a fish out of water.

As the blaze began to consume it, no one did. The demon was left to his demons.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Techno fired. The bright pink firework rocketed towards the ceiling and hit the chandelier's unstable support with a loud bang.

The chandelier swayed dangerously and everything fell silent. Then, the ground began to rumble. Pebbles turned into large stones, and large stones turned into boulders.

The chandelier creaked one last time, pondering its trajectory, then made up its mind. It dropped straight down, impaling the wooden floor like a spear.

But Philza and Technoblade ran up to the surface, and for the first time, turned away from their display of destruction. What was done was done, and the Egg wasn't even worth watching burn.

It was just another day, another empire brought down.

Everyone had heard Pogtopia cave in, months ago.

But that night, everyone *felt* the Egg's cavern collapse, the ground quaking and shaking under their feet as the shrieks were well and truly muffled.

There was still the overground problem of the jungle of tendrils wrapping up the landscape for as far as the eye could see, but they too seemed to be dwindling in number.

Puffy wrapped her arms around herself. While the scorching cave seared her skin and made her sweat profusely, the air outside was bitterly cold and chilled her to the bone.

The night was pitch black, devoid of stars. Even the moon seemed like it had turned its gaze away in shame, and in complete indifference to the frozen gathering underneath it.

The screams and shrieks of both pain and fear had dulled to hushed chatter as burned and battered guests looked around themselves. Torn, burned, bloody and reeling from shock. The mingling nations had since redivided into their factions, sticking close to their peers and all asking the same question: now what?

Now what? Did everyone just go home? How could they after everything that had just happened?

Puffy slapped her arms for a bit of warmth, turning her head to the floor. A small, thin red vine crawled and limped towards her like a worm. She stomped her hoof down on it out of spite.

"He's losing blood."

Puffy turned around. Sam was still holding Antfrost, and gaping in horror at his bloodied chest. Velvet was by his side, a shaking hand grasping around the cat's paw and staying put even as the red cascades continued to soak everything they touched.

The scene broke her heart.

"Puffy?"

She tore her eyes away from the wounded body. Sam's gaze burned into hers, green, black, insistent and questioning. Unable to hold it, she looked away. Her grip around herself tightened.

Sam, thankfully, must have taken her silence for what it was. "Maybe we should get him to Nikki's," he suggested.

"We don't know if the Egg is gone completely or not, it's too dangerous," someone else reminded him.

Philza. At least *he* had come out somewhat unscathed.

"Snowchester. We can take him to Snowchester," Puffy blurted out. Faced with everyone's stares, she cowered. "I have supplies."

"And it's far away from the mainland," Sam added, jumping to her defence. "The Egg never reached it."

"It sounds far," Velvet panicked, "he might not make it!"

"He definitely will if I take him."

Without waiting for any sign of agreement, Philza approached the wounded and held out his arms. Sam hesitated, sharing a brief glance with Velvet, then gently handed over Antfrost's body to the avian.

Seeing him so limp and so defenceless, like a bundle of dead fur...

Sam said he was still breathing, but how long for? How many lives did he have left? Was this his last one? Had Puffy started a new era of grief for everyone present? What if—

"Fireworks!"

In unison, everyone turned around. Somewhere in the vast darkness of the Badlands, in the distance, there was a bang, followed by a giant explosion of glittering red stars. Like a flare, it lit up the night sky and everything underneath, bathing the world in a dark, gloomy shade.

A red shade.

Blood red.

It made Puffy shudder, but at least it lit up the path before them. People began to drift towards it, attempting to get close to something familiar. Another firework shot up soon after, bursting with the same colour.

However, what was at first a beacon of relief and help soon begged a more pressing question: who was firing the rockets?

Puffy's first thought was Technoblade, but that theory was soon proved wrong once the piglin ambled up to her right.

"It's Tommy," he whispered, almost in awe.

The captain snapped to her senses at the name. "Tommy?"

"I taught him to make rockets when he lived with me in the tundra," the piglin continued. Puffy watched as he took off his masquerade mask and threw it away without taking his eyes off the flare. "He wasn't the most talented crafter, I'll be honest, but I remember that he wanted all of them to be red."

"His favourite colour."

Puffy turned to her left. Sam closed his mouth and averted his gaze, almost in shame.

"His favourite colour," Techno agreed with him, softly.

Puffy turned to the firework display again, squinting and trying to distinguish the figure that fired them. It was far too dark to really see, the few faint candles retrieved by the gathering barely being enough to light themselves up.

"Is everyone here?" Technoblade called out, and Puffy snapped back to her group as the piglin started a head count.

She looked around too, watching in relief as everyone began to reunite.

Nikki was the first, her dress scorched and torn but her cheeks glowing. The captain pulled her into a quick but tight hug.

Then came Ranboo, cradling his arm against his chest. Technoblade immediately walked up to him and began to examine it.

Philza and Sam were already present too, so there was only one still missing.

"Where's Sapnap?"

"He's with Karl," replied Ranboo, wincing when Techno touched his wrist.

"Is he being held prisoner?"

"No, not at all, he's... It's complicated..."

The hybrid cried out when the piglin tried to take his hand, immediately piquing his concern.

"We need to get moving, now," he ordered, squinting into the darkness. "Get some horses and clear off before everyone's sights turn to us."

"I thought we were here to help everyone," Nikki said.

"Oh, we are, but getting rid of the Egg is as far as many would want us to go. Ranboo's injured and I'm assuming that so are most of you. We're no use if we're all dead."

"I'm flying to Snowchester," Philza told Technoblade, hoisting up Antfrost's body.

"Me, Puffy and Velvet are going too," Sam quickly added, before striding off into the obscurity.

Technoblade watched him go, then turned back to everyone else, "I'll bring Ranboo back to the Commune. Nikki?"

"I'll follow you," she confirmed, standing tall.

Sam returned a moment later, yanking along four well-groomed horses that seemed to have been taken from carriages. Their white and sand-coloured pelts glimmered in the red light of the flares, and they tossed their heads, agitated, when another bang resonated across the Badlands.

Techno took the first one, helping Ranboo mount in front of him and making sure to hold him tight. Nikki swiftly followed suit on the calmest of the four steeds, looping the reins a few times around her hands.

Puffy took the next horse.

"Ever ridden bareback?" she asked, mounting the white stallion effortlessly.

Velvet gulped, eyeing the steed in terror. "I've never even ridden before," he admitted.

Nevertheless, the captain reached down and pulled him up behind her, securing his arms around her waist. "Just hold on."

She watched as Sam mounted the last one, attempting to calm his stallion as another firework went off.

Puffy took a moment to survey the scene, scanning the crowd from her vantage point. She saw the terrified, the injured, the dead. She did notice, however, that there seemed to be a lot less guests than there had been in the cavern, a *lot* less – less than half, in fact.

"Where's the Eggpire?" she asked aloud.

Those who heard her fell silent, casting nervous glances around them. The captain peered too, hoping she was mistaken. Perhaps the Egg really *was* gone, and those who had been turned had been freed from its clutches.

But then where were Punz, Ponk, and most importantly, Bad? The only member of the Eggpire that seemed to have been left behind was Antfrost, or at least his corpse was.

It was a relief, for sure, but also a worry. That meant that they could be anywhere and even if the Egg had left them for good, a good few of the members would still be out for some sort of revenge – Punz especially. The mere thought made her shiver.

"Eret," she called out to the monarch, who was comforting some of his nobles not too far away, "where's the Eggpire?"

The monarch turned his attention to her, then away as he too began to search the mass of survivors. She could see his concern only grow every second that passed, when he could clearly not give her an answer.

"They're gone," King Eret finally concluded, but not without snapping to attention.

"Gone?!" cried another voice in fury. Quackity strode towards the king. "What do you mean, gone?!"

"They've vanished!" Eret glanced over at the leader of Las Nevadas. "How many soldiers can you spare?"

"All of them."

"Good. Meet me at the palace with as many battalions as you can make. I'll ask for Foolish's support too. The Eggpire can't get away with this."

For a moment, Puffy was worried by the pure anger in Eret's tone, but she thankfully remembered that he was a careful leader. He wouldn't go on a rampage and even if Quackity turned into a loose cannon, he would keep him in line. After all, no one would be stupid enough to defy His Majesty's orders, not even Big Q of Las Nevadas himself.

The realization was comforting, in a way, and reassured her that her corrupted friends wouldn't meet the same fate as Antfrost, at least not immediately without a fair trial and some serious debates among essentially everyone.

Speaking of the cat, as Puffy looked once more towards her painfully violent act, she found him no longer there. Phil neither. It was only when she turned her gaze to the black sky that she saw a dark angel fly north.

"We need to hurry," Sam said, cantering his steed up to hers.

Velvet's hands tightened around her at the urgency in her friend's voice. Her own chest constricted as well, and she nodded, "Let's go."

She clicked her tongue and turned her horse around, only to suddenly be met with a sea of faces. She struggled to calm her mount, and Sam's apparently reared at the sight, or at least a sharp whinny and his cry of surprise led her to believe.

Puffy was speechless. Faces drained of colour, splattered with blood, burns and grime; torn evening-wear hanging from injured and shaking frames in shambles; once sparkling and smiling figures now glimmering dully in the momentary fireworks and faint candelabra light; their wide and sorrowful eyes, some still partially hidden by their masks, turned up towards them with a look of utter awe she couldn't exactly comprehend. She pulled back, slightly unsettled.

Or maybe it wasn't her that they were focused on.

"Where is he?!"

The crowd parted, letting through a stumbling, blindfolded figure who tripped at every step, catching himself on whoever was closest. Unseeing, charging around and trying to find something, someone. A familiar, glowing figure followed a few steps behind him, attempting desperately to guide the blinded man onto the right track.

Eventually, Karl Jacobs stumbled onto the horses' paths, clawing at their silky pelts and manes until his hands caught something else. An ankle, and then a leg, travelling up until his fingers interlaced with a gloved hand.

"It's you," Karl breathed, trembling, "it's really you..."

Sapnap shared an anxious look with Puffy, just as puzzled as she was. She could also hear the rest of her allies behind her, undoubtedly shifting just as uncomfortably and uneasily as she and Velvet were. All eyes were on them.

But Sam seemed the most taken aback and paralyzed of them all, staring down at Karl as if the blindfolded man was going to suddenly cut off his entire hand.

Then, it hit Puffy – the reason why a collective silence had fallen, and why her friend was so terrified by a simple address.

Sam was supposed to be dead, and everyone knew that. He was branded a phantom among the living, one of the many ghosts of Pandora's Vault – or as Technoblade would say, collateral damage in Dream's successful escape plan.

Yet here Karl Jacobs, the leader of Kinoko Kingdom, was: grasping his hand and bowing lowly before him.

"The universe was right!" Karl was practically weeping at Sam's feet. "Hope still remains, Hope is alive, and Hope has escaped from Pandora's Box."

Hope.

Sam raised his gaze to finally take in the world around him, and their reactions. Fear, yes, and confusion, but also utter wonder. It was like they were staring at a god.

He glanced over to Puffy, unsure of what to do. Her and Velvet looked just as confused as he was.

He gulped, and instead tried to find some answers in Technoblade's face. The piglin, like the rest of the Syndicate, was just as silent and puzzled. Puzzled yes, but also visibly and inherently nervous, or so his frequent tugs on his stallion's reins and the light but unbalanced dance he pulled him into on the spot suggested.

He looked back at Karl, at the wide-eyed gathering. His fountain of words ran dry, leaving him with a stale, bitter aftertaste. What could he do, what could he say? He couldn't just run away and leave them all, they seemed to be waiting for something. Not for him, surely.

He wasn't their king, or their general. In fact, even if he wasn't dead, he should have been hated. He had let Dream escape Pandora's Vault. He was the warden, and he had

failed his only important mission. He had let a maniac loose and ready to wreak his tempest of tyranny back over the Greater SMP and any nation that dared try to counter it.

He had "escaped" Pandora's Vault, yes, but that didn't mean he was the good guy – to some perhaps, but not to anyone else. After all, Hope was always left *inside* the box, and all that came out were the evils of the world.

"I'm not Hope," Sam replied.

"You *are*," Karl pressed, his hands clawing once again at his own. "The universe said so!"

Sam looked out over the crowd again. "It's wrong then. Very wrong."

He couldn't see Karl's eyes behind the blindfold tied around his head, but everything painted itself in his smile.

"The universe is never wrong," he assured Sam. "You *are* Hope, because you came back to us, and you saved us from the Egg."

"We all did," Sam corrected, motioning to his friends.

"Then you are all our saviors."

And then, in a movement no one expected, Karl Jacobs fell to one knee and bowed his head. The rest of the gathering still followed, until only those on horses and Sapnap were still upright.

Sam was speechless, as was everyone else. He turned to Nikki. She caught his gaze, and shook her head.

"They're... bowing," Ranboo whispered, sounding absolutely dumbfounded. "Why are they bowing? We're not royals, or—"

"Respect," Technoblade interrupted. When Sam glanced at him, he found him just as starstruck by the scene as everyone else was. "They're showing us respect."

Respect for a devout and genocidal anarchist, two dangerous arsonists, a forgetful yet treacherous hybrid, and a warden who had failed. The world was going mad.

He wanted to ask them all to rise, to stop revering them like gods, and yet he stopped himself.

"Sam." Puffy pulled him back to reality. "We need to get to Snowchester."

He nodded quickly and turned his steed but lingered a moment longer, still waiting for a proper explanation, a final goodbye. In the end, he left without.

The race towards the Badlands' Nether portal was a wild and bumpy one. The moor may have been a flat place, but still held a number of tripping hazards hidden by the heather bushes and rabbit burrows. Hooves thundered under and beside Sam as their steeds dashed across the uneven ground.

Gods, the Badlands... He hadn't seen his land in months, and boy did he miss it!

He would have stopped to take it all in for a moment if their mission hadn't been so pressing. From the brief glances he did get, visions of beauty rushed back to him. There was still some red here and there, occasionally carpeting the ground underneath the horses' hooves, but it became scarcer and scarcer the further they got away.

Sam risked a glance beside him, at his two other companions. Velvet was undoubtedly the most terrified of them all, simultaneously clinging onto Puffy's back for dear life and still in a frenzy over Ant.

Meanwhile, Puffy was every inch the warrior she was, her back hunched against the sharp wind that sliced at them as they galloped past, eyes focused on the horizon and strong determination radiating from every inch of her being. The fighter, the avenger, the soft and beautiful violence that had saved him that night.

Captain Puffy, strong, determined, brave, and golden-hearted. Sam began to wonder why he hadn't fallen for her sooner.

They continued on through the moor until they came to the portal, then kept their fast pace all the way through the Nether despite Velvet's squeals of protest. Their journey was done in record time, and it only felt like a few minutes had passed when the familiar tundra weather welcomed them into Snowchester's walls.

They galloped through the streets and between the houses, ignoring the puzzled cries of the inhabitants that had come out to investigate the strange fireworks still booming across the ocean.

Puffy's home came into view soon after, the hill growing closer and closer the faster they pushed their horses. Philza's winged silhouette cut against the stone and wooden cabin, and the creeping reminder of the lives at stake rushed back to them all.

"What took you so long?" Phil cried once they had finally reached him.

Sam glanced only once at Antfrost's limp body, and snapped back, "We don't all have wings, Phil!"

"Quick, get him inside!"

Puffy flung open the door to the cabin and everyone else swarmed in like a plague.

Philza went first, still carrying Ant's unconscious body. His large wings had to be unceremoniously shoved through the open door, and once inside, it was obvious that more than a few things were being knocked over.

Then came Velvet, decidedly smaller than Philza but just as destructive, fighting with the walls and furniture in an attempt to stick to his beloved's fur like sweet golden honey. His cries of dismay and muffled, repeated mantras broke Sam's heart as he came in right behind him.

The remains of a blazing fire smouldered in the hearth, and the lights were left on. That didn't make navigation in their frantic state any easier, nor did the embers banish the cold fear gripping their very cores.

Sam turned his head towards the stairs, where the tip of Philza's wings disappeared from view and prepared to rush after them. He was only stopped when he saw something small run up to him out of the corner of his eye and latch onto his leg.

"Sam!" a loud bubbly voice cried, belonging to a bright, smiling face that greeted Sam when he looked down.

He froze in his tracks, suddenly speechless. His previous worry over Antfrost faded into a strange sense of fear, chewing at his core and making him swallow hard.

It was an odd cry of delight to hear, for many reasons. For one, not many yelled his name with such an excited, joyful tone – he was more accustomed to fear and rage. For another, the last time he had set eyes on the little creature was many, many months ago, and she had been terrified to death and asleep in his arms. There was no way a young piglin such as Michelle could have remembered that, remembered him, unless...

Sam looked at Puffy, who was staring at the little piglin wrapped around his leg with just as much surprise as he was. They shared looks, both indecipherable to each other's minds, and the captain shook her head before rushing off to a corner of her home.

You told her about me, didn't you, Sam guessed, his chest tight as he struggled to stay silent. You told her about me, hoping I'd come one day and be a part of her life. You cared about me enough to do that.

Wishful thinking. It only made his guilt grow.

When Michelle tugged at his leg again, he crouched down to her height, ignoring the tremor in his body and his voice.

"Hey," he said softly.

He held out his hand towards her as if to ruffle the fur on her head, then recoiled, then did so again to give her a high five, and then recoiled, and continued pulling his hand out and in, not knowing what he was trying to achieve. Eventually, he settled on simply resting it on his knee.

There was no reason to be so awkward, so scared. He had the right to be fearful of many things, but a little piglin was not one of them. She was just a kid, why would Sam fear a—

Michelle let out a small grunt of delight and levering herself up thanks to his knee, reached up and affectionately pressed her snout against his cheek. Her breath was delicate and gentle, like the soft warmth of a candle flame, and he melted under it.

He still couldn't help the feeling of uneasiness tugging at him and pushing him to leave – clearly a coward's way out. He wasn't going to take it, not this time.

It was quite ridiculous. After all, he was the one with the soft spot for all the children he had encountered, and they were part of the reason he had let his warden's duty and his culpability at his slightest slip-up consume him. Tommy had been – and still was, no matter what history had chosen to drag up between them – a perfect example.

Again, Michelle was just a kid, like Tommy! Why would Sam be scared?

"I missed you," the little piglin said, pulling away from him and jumping up and down excitedly.

Maybe it was because she actually wanted him around.

"I... missed you too," he replied, forcing out a small smile.

And he realized that was the truth.

"Sam."

He looked up and saw Puffy staring at him with something in her hands a few feet away.

"Wait a minute, princess," he whispered back to Michelle, and stood up.

"Princess?" Puffy questioned once he reached her side.

Sam froze, taken aback by his own words. "It just slipped out," he said honestly, watching her reaction carefully.

The captain didn't say anything else, just slightly tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. It was like she was staring at him for the first time, unsure of who he was.

But before Sam could say anything more, she handed him a bowl of warm water and a few rags, along with a pouch of herbs and a roll of bandages, "Take this up to Philza."

For a brief moment, their hands brushed, and Sam could finally see and feel how bloodstained and trembling they were. Before she pulled away, he lay a gentle, gloved touch on her wrist. It wasn't much, but it was the only way he could try and reassure her, let her know she wasn't alone.

Puffy lingered for a moment, refusing to cross his gaze, then quickly turned her back to him and walked away. He didn't try to call her back, and headed instead towards the stairs with a heavy heart.

Climbing up a few steps, even while holding a good few healing supplies, should have been an easy feat, but even so, Sam had to try and stop himself from tripping frequently. He was starting to hear Velvet's pleas and whimpers again, and Philza's empty words of reassurance that made Sam's worry for Ant's state only grow again.

Once he reached the bedroom, he was immediately accosted by Philza, who reached for the supplies he held with a relieved sigh.

"Oh thank the gods," the avian muttered, spinning away and heading back towards the unconscious figure lying in the bed.

The only light in the whole room was a dim lamp hanging overhead, the candle inside no more than a stub of melted wax. It only made the scene before Sam that much gloomier.

Antfrost had never looked so small and frail, his body drowning in the sea of soft pillows and blankets. The remains of his evening-wear had been discarded on the floor beside the bed, the rags somehow looking more rigid than his own body was. His white and tan fur had seemingly faded to grey in the obscurity and with Velvet bawling his eyes out at his side, grasping his hand like it was the last thing he could do to keep him there, Sam was close to assuming he was gone for good.

The thought that he might be losing his last life drained everything from him, and he had to hold on to the edge of the bed's woodwork for support.

"Phil, is he going to make it?" he asked hoarsely, adding on to all the similarly frantic questions Velvet had been undoubtedly asking him too.

Philza wet one of the rags in the water and wrung it out. He hesitated, then looked over to Sam. "I don't know," he said back, in a tone much calmer than his eyes and breathing made him out to be, "but I bloody well hope so..."

He turned back to the cat, and began to tend to his fatal injury. Sam watched on, anxiously holding his breath and resisting the urge to jump in and tend to it himself.

Thankfully, Philza seemed to be dealing with it pretty well and as the tense minutes ticked on, Sam began to relax a little.

Now he was watching it being cleaned up, he could see that the wound itself could have been much, much worse. The hole where the foil had pierced had looked bigger back in the cavern with blood spewing out of it like an endless fountain – now, he could see that it was no wider than a finger. That didn't mean it wasn't as serious or bleeding as much, but now it was being properly looked after, the worry died down.

Philza finished cleaning most of the blood staining Antfrost's fur around the puncture wound and furiously cleaned out the gash until the blood flow began to slow. Then, after stuffing a handful of sweet-smelling herbs and pressing another wet rag on top of them, he wound long strips of bandages around to secure them in place. Sam and Velvet helped him by holding up Antfrost until the avian finished his work, then set him back down again gently.

"Here," Philza said, handing the bowl and the rest of the cloth over to Velvet, "keep an eye on him, and make sure he doesn't fall any sicker."

Velvet quickly dried his eyes with the back of his hand, then nodded and dutifully took what he was handed, wasting no time in carefully sponging Ant's forehead.

The gentleness and adoration with which he did so warmed Sam's heart, and simultaneously tore it to pieces. He could never imagine how hard being apart from the love of your life could be for an endless length of time, and only reunite through a tragedy.

Well, he had a good idea already, but he would clearly never know what it was like for Antfrost and Velvet.

"I think he's got a good chance," Philza's voice whispered near Sam's ear, making him jump.

He turned to the avian, then back at Ant's motionless body. "Okay," he sighed in relief, trying to ground himself and his emotions, "alright. That's good to hear."

"Things would have been speedier if I had a Healing potion on hand," Phil admitted, "but I think he'll recover without. It just might take a little longer."

"As long as he'll recover in the end."

"Oh he will, but he'll be sore for days. You and Puffy beat him up quite badly."

Immediately, Sam's demeanour fell, and he cast a quick look around them. Puffy's absence in the room with them spoke volumes.

"I know what you're thinking," Phil said.

Sam couldn't play it off. "Maybe I should go and check on her," he suggested.

"Not yet, give her some space. You both need to take a breather before you talk."

"She seemed very... agitated," Sam said, recalling how she turned from him without so much as a look or a breath in his direction.

Perhaps he sounded a lot more hurt than he intended to be, as Philza gave him a friendly nudge and an understanding smile.

"Don't take it personally, mate. It's been a hard night for all of us."

"I'm not taking it—"

And then Sam saw *that* knowing glint in the avian's eyes.

Gods, he thought, not you too...

Visibly, Technoblade couldn't keep any of his suspicions to himself. That, or everyone else had begun to pick up on the signs too. Both outcomes made Sam roll his eyes.

Just at that moment, there was a sharp tapping sound at the window, and Sam spotted the faint, dark outline of a bird hopping to and fro on the windowsill.

He drew Phil's attention to it, "I think that's for you."

Now it was Philza's turn to roll his eyes, and he strode off towards the visitor's perch. He cracked open the window a little, and the crow began to chatter incoherently.

Sam turned away, pulling a chair up at Antfrost's bedside and taking a seat, his hands anxiously clasped under his chin. He was thankful for his gloves, that smoothed his skin and masked the likely clamminess of his palms, sweating from all the tension, worries, high emotions and blazing fire he had encountered that night.

At first, he just watched Ant; his lips parted ever so slightly, the slow, strained rising and falling of his chest, his drab, matted pelt, and the bandage tightly wound over his chest. His breathing was faint, barely audible, and shallow.

Even so, Philza seemed certain that he'd survive with the rest of his lives intact, and Sam was inclined to trust the word of a man who had lived for thousands and thousands of years.

He reached out and took Antfrost's paw, trying not to recoil as the tips of his sheathed claws brushed his gloves. He held it for a while, and squeezed it. He trailing his eyes back over the cat's body, ignoring the pit in his stomach when he spotted a number of bruises and new cuts between his strands of fur. He knew full well that he was the main culprit responsible for them.

Trying to take his mind off the darker side of things, he let his eyes wander around the bedroom.

Sam had never been there, understandably so, but he had to admit it was a cosy little place. Occupying the whole level just up a small set of stairs, the bedroom was made up mostly of dark spruce planks, lining the slanted walls and running up behind the rafters and beams holding up the roof.

Even with no fireplace, it was warm, heated by the stones of the chimney that jutted out awkwardly from the wall, and filled with a few bits of furniture and personal items.

There were a few chests that strongly resembled those belonging to the feared pirates that sailed the seven seas. All the cargo from Puffy's ship had been lost to the jagged rocks and tumultuous waves of the bay, so these particular chests were most likely ones she made out of pure nostalgia. That only led to wonder what glittering treasures could have potentially been held inside them.

Some of the walls were plastered with maps, marked and depicting places Sam had never even heard of, others were bare, and a couple were lined with a shelf or two holding numerous books that had clearly seen better days.

But the final thing Sam's eyes were drawn to was by far the one that caught his attention for the longest.

A bag made out of scratched, water-stained leather, sitting like a plump chicken on a chest at the foot of the bed. It looked full.

"You prepare a pack and put it at the foot of your bed. Tomorrow will be the day you'd leave, you tell yourself. Then, you sleep on it, and wake up. You don't go. You can't go, but the thought still lingers."

Sam began to wonder how long the thought had lingered in her mind and, more importantly, what had kept stopping her. He had his suspicions, but it wasn't for him to voice them.

From the pack, his eyes drifted towards the staircase. The hole in the floor glowed with a mellow, golden light, only disturbed by a small shadow shyly clinging on to the banister at the top.

Sam tilted his head, signaling that he had seen her, then smiled and beckoned the shadow closer. Immediately, Michelle ran up to him and let him lift her onto his lap. She was unbelievably light, so light and fragile in fact that Sam was scared he was somehow going to shatter her with his strength. That, combined with the previous thoughts of parental inadequacy that came to haunt him as well as his guilt over Ant's state, didn't make Sam completely mentally stable.

"Who is that?" the little piglin asked him, her single eye glued to the cat in her mother's bed.

Sam held her gently against him as she shifted, trying to sit comfortably on his lap. "He's a friend," he replied. "His name is Antfrost, and he's the bravest cat I've ever met."

Michelle nodded in understanding, then looked back at the patient. Her face fell. "Is he sick?"

"You could... say that, yes," Sam replied after a brief hesitation that twisted his insides. "He's sick."

"Oh." She pouted. "Being sick isn't fun."

"No, it isn't."

Before Sam could stop her, Michelle reached out and grabbed Antfrost's paw in two hands, then gave it a quick kiss. She dropped it again, and looked up at Sam.

"Momma says that always makes things better," she said with a bright smile.

Her childhood innocence combined with her naive but good little heart and intentions almost made Sam cry. He didn't know why, it was dumb, it was meaningless, it was—

Congratulations Sam, you're learning to be a father again.

If that little, persistent voice of his was meant to reassure him, then it was sorely mistaken. If anything, it made his self-esteem and confidence shrivel up even more.

If only problems *could* go away with nothing but a kiss.

What he would give for simpler times, or a world with those rules.

In an effort to compose himself, he caught Velvet's gaze, who had noticeably been listening in to the conversation happening opposite him. He too looked close to crying, although Sam knew it was for a whole other reason.

"As Michelle said," he told him, "he'll get better."

"Well, nothing can make things better quicker than a kiss," Velvet replied with a chuckle, giving Michelle a smile.

The little piglin fidgeted on his lap, practically ready to explode with pride, and Sam quickly made sure she wasn't going to fall.

"Kisses and sleep are the two best kinds of medicine," someone else interrupted, and Philza walked back from the window. He knelt down to Michelle's height and ruffled the top of her head. "Now Ant has gotten one of them already thanks to this young lady, I think he needs to get the other as soon as possible."

Sam took that as his cue to leave and he stood up, hoisting the piglin into his arms. She hung on to his neck and buried her face in his shoulder, content.

"I need to go," Philza said in a low voice, "Technoblade said that Ranboo's wrist is very likely broken."

Immediately, Sam's worry switched from Antfrost to the young hybrid somewhere in the tundra. "Will *he* be alright?"

"It's just a broken bone, nothing the body can't fix on its own," the avian reassured him.

"Do you need any extra help? I can—"

"Sam, your place is here, with your family. Both of us have been running too long from those who really need us, and I think we need to start to change and patch it all up."

Sam didn't dare correct Philza by insisting that the Syndicate were his family too, but he was about to. Then, he realized that when Phil meant "family", he was being a lot more specific. He meant the injured cat, and the little piglin, and the sheep he had become so infatuated with in recent months. People that needed him, and vice-versa. No matter how much he wished it, Sam could not be in two places at once.

That didn't mean his worry for Ranboo and his other friends was any less important.

"If you need anything," he still insisted, "just ask."

Philza nodded, "Will do."

With that finality, Sam was about to show Philza out himself, but that was visibly not necessary. Before he could even offer, the avian bid them adieu, and promptly leapt out of the open window.

Sam felt his whole body lurch in terror, then relax when he saw his friend rise again and swoop off, carried by his large black wings and the braces that adorned them.

He would never manage to suppress the tinge of pride that always sparked whenever he saw Philza fly again, knowing that he had done that. He – Sam, Daedalus – had given that freedom to the avian once again.

However, there were still some things he couldn't bring back, like a life, and he turned back to the bed.

"Maybe Phil's right," he said aloud, "we should leave Antfrost to sleep."

Velvet, upon being addressed, sat up straight again and shook his head. "I think I'll stay here," he said, "just in case he wakes up."

Or if there's a problem, Sam added, being careful to keep his thoughts to himself. He didn't want to think about the thousands of potential things that could end up halving Ant's chances of survival by the second.

"Alright," Sam agreed. "If you need anything, just call."

"I will."

Velvet took Antfrost's paw again and interlaced their fingers, rubbing his cheek against his fur. He lingered there for a moment longer, then gave him a kiss and settled down by his side.

Sam hated being able to do nothing but be on standby for both Antfrost and Ranboo, yet he knew his place.

The cat was a dear friend, but they would never have the same, titanium connection that bonded him with Velvet. If Antfrost was to open his eyes anytime soon, then his lover would and should be the first one to see him, and vice-versa. Ant's fate was now out of his hands, replaced by something smaller and warmer that clung to him like a mussel on a rock.

Sam made his way down the flight of stairs, concentrating deeply on making sure not to trip or knock the precious darling in his arms.

There was another bond, apparently, that had formed recently, and Sam had had no idea about it until now, yet seemingly it was an unbelievably strong one.

Michelle shifted a little, and an audible yawn tickled the nape of his neck.

"Someone's tired," he noted with a smile.

The little piglin pulled back a little, just allowing him to watch her rub her eye sleepily.

"Goodnight?" she mumbled. It was a request more than a classic, childish question.

Sam nuzzled her snout. "Goodnight," he agreed.

Before Sam knew it, he was kneeling down in the room in the windmill adjacent to Puffy's house, the empty space having been recently turned into a cosy little room for Michelle, with a bed, a couple of shelves piled with toys and books, and staggering amount of blankets and pillows.

At least it was warm enough for Michelle, and that was the most important thing.

The piglin was curled up with a stuffed chicken at her side, eagerly fidgeting as Sam tucked her in.

In complete honesty, Sam had never been put in charge of a child's nighttime routine before. Back when he lived with his family, it was the governess that took care of that duty, and Tommy, well, Tommy wasn't a kid. A quick goodnight and a discreet hug before he strode back home was the closest thing Sam had gotten to "tucking him in".

Now, he was put in charge of a proper situation, and he knew he had to be careful, especially in these lands where dreams and nightmares alike could haunt someone at the slightest slip-up.

However, everything was going great, or so it seemed to Sam. So far, all it had consisted of was making sure Michelle was comfortable enough and piling every blanket or pillow she asked for.

So far, so good. He didn't like to toot his own horn, but he was sure that he was doing pretty well for his first time. He allowed himself a small smile of victory.

"You alright?" he whispered, unable to stop his doubts creeping in.

Michelle nodded vigorously, and closed her eyes contently when Sam leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

"Story?" she asked, giving him a soft, puppy eyed gaze.

Gods, Sam did not like how that made him melt. If she kept it up, that little piglin would be spoiled rotten by him and he wouldn't be able to stop himself. It had been a while since he had truly told someone a story.

He pondered for a moment, shifting through the myths and legends Techno had recently been cramming into his mind. Daedalus and Icarus, Theseus and the Minotaur, King Midas, Herakles, the Iliad, the Odyssey...

But no matter how much he tried, he couldn't shake the feeling that none of them would do, at least for that evening. Instead, he settled on something slightly closer to them. It was a tale that perhaps no one bothered telling anymore, but it couldn't disappear or be erased from history, and if Sam was the only one to still tell it and keep it alive, he would.

"Alright," he said, turning back to Michelle. He sat on the edge of her bed, grinning as she stared up at him expectantly. "Have you ever heard of the legend of L'Manberg?"

Apparently not, and so he began. A few sentences in, he could already see her eye drift shut, but she was young and tired, and so he couldn't blame her. She still struggled on, hanging on to his every word before she finally drifted into a soft, fuzzy dreamland. Sam knew he could have stopped there, and yet he knew he also couldn't.

He continued his tale without an audience, more for himself than anything. He painted each character, each scene in his mind, no matter how painful. He dulled some events, some of the battles too violent to stomach after the Red Banquet and Antfrost's critical condition. He lingered on anecdotes and the lighthearted tales, on Tommy and Tubbo's simultaneous competence and innocence, on Nikki's kindness, on Philza's heartbreak, on Technoblade's valid reasons for destruction and warnings, and on Dream's mistakes.

He ended at Doomsday, which unsurprisingly lowered his spirits. He decided to sugarcoat it.

"L'Manberg was gone for good, but lessons were learned, and its inhabitants were free again. Free to live, free to love, free to escape. L'Manberg was a beacon of freedom even after its final fall."

His last words curled up into the air, and he waited for them to finally disperse. Michelle was still asleep, the home was still silent, and he was alright too.

Sam felt... a little liberated.

He stood up with a sigh, his relief soon turning into a hiss as his arm began to ache and burn him. He looked down and finally took note of the scarily large, red lake soaking his sleeve.

Turning away from Michelle and grimacing, he pinched the fabric between two fingers and slowly pulled. The now-stiff linen peeled off the bloody wound uncomfortably, making him wince. He could feel it start to bleed again, running down his forearms and tickling his skin.

He was tempted to go back upstairs and ask Velvet for a roll of bandages, but thought better of it. Instead, he took off his silk scarf and tied it tightly around the wound like a torque. It hurt him even more and felt mildly uncomfortable, but it was the best he could do with what he had.

After dressing his wound, Sam looked around him. Everything was silent. Even with Antfrost on death's door, Velvet's worry, and the other scratches and bruises that littered their bodies, the house's inhabitants that night had found a sense of sleepy bliss. Or so he thought at first.

Sam was about to leave Michelle's windmill room when a strange shape on the floor caught his eye.

A hoofprint, defined by ash, blood and dirt.

Another one lay just a little ahead of it, and another one after that. Sam followed them with his eyes, staring as they ascended the rickety wooden staircase spiralling up along the inside of the tower. A small door sat ajar at the top of the flight, letting through the smallest sliver of light.

Sam placed a foot onto the first step, and stopped. If Puffy's previous attitude had told him anything, it was that she didn't want his pity – but he wasn't planning on giving her any, far from it.

Instead, all he wanted to do was be honest, and as frank as their emotional states would allow them both to be.

With that admittedly nerve-wracking thought spurring him on, Sam continued his ascent up to the skies.

Chapter Sixty-Five: The Edge Of The Cliff

Sam soon realized that he was discovering so much more of Puffy's home than he ever had before. The few times he had come to hers, he had been no further than beyond the hearth, because all he had really needed – the captain herself – had been right there in front of him. This evening however had him rushing up and down stairs and exploring corners he had never seen.

The fact that the windmill itself was the last spot he was to venture into seemed to be inevitable, and a way to tidily tie up his discoveries as well as a chapter in his own story.

The make-or-break encounter.

He didn't like that term, but there was no better way to describe it.

The windmill connected to the cabin wasn't one that was used. If anything it was for aesthetic purposes only, with no noisy mechanisms or heavy wheat grinders to drill into one's head. Instead, the inside was a hollow room, and the sails outside simply turned lazily with whichever way the wind blew.

There was no particular reason or rhyme to its existence – except perhaps to act as a decorative addition that doubled up as what eventually became Michelle's bedroom. Sam was curious to talk to the architect who had designed it, and attempt to understand their thought process behind it.

As someone who kept every inch of his projects purposeful and useful, he occasionally still had a hard time wrapping his head around the concept of decorative structures.

Once he reached the top of the stairs, he paused. The door was still open, beckoning to him with a frozen finger. The cold air coaxed him outside. He took a deep breath, and followed it.

Stepping out into the bitter Snowchester night was like diving headfirst into a snowdrift. In a matter of seconds, Sam was completely frozen to the bone, his skin feeling like stiff, dry leather stretched mercilessly over his skeleton and muscles. His breath curled out of his mouth and nose, escaping into the air and carried off by the gentle wind. Every huff and puff was heavy with the burning gunpowder scent of his anxiety.

The door had led out to a small, narrow stretch of wood that wound around the windmill's body. He came out just behind the windmill's sails that occasionally blocked his view of Snowchester with their canvas wings.

Looking up, he took a moment to admire the night sky and the stars that sparkled against it. Silver and white, they glimmered like precious stones, and some even fell from the heavens to greet him. They tumbled elegantly, floating more than falling. They landed on Sam's face, hair, clothes, injuries, and piled up on the railings that circled the tower.

It was bitterly cold, yes, but the narrow walkway also seemed like a nice, quiet place to think. As Sam continued to follow the hoofprints in the freshly fallen snow, he knew he wasn't the only one to think that.

He didn't have to search very far. The moon had emerged from behind its silky, veil-like clouds and cast a milky blue light on the surroundings, dimly lighting up a figure standing a few steps in front of him.

Sam's first reaction to the foreign sight of Puffy in a dress much earlier that evening, he wasn't afraid to admit, had been complete and utter awe. Not only was the gown stunning in and of itself, but its absolute beauty on the captain rendered him weak at the knees. He had been *completely* smitten from that moment on. He had been a fool to ever think or convince himself otherwise. Subtle feelings had grown to a point that hours later, jealousy had become a part of that bargain too.

So much had happened since they had first set foot into the masquerade that night. So much horror and violence, and even Puffy hadn't been spared.

The long, beautiful dress had been mercilessly cut short, a long jagged tear by her knees replacing the trailing hem that kissed the floor. The rest was stained and burned, smeared with spilt wine and dark, dusty ash, turning the once vibrant and gleaming silks into a masterpiece tarnished and torn by battle.

Her body was no more than a stone cold statue in both expression and pallor. Her curls seemed to be the only still healthy part of her, bouncing and waving in the frigid breeze and catching the snowflakes as they fell. Her blue eyes, once so bright and sparkling, had turned dark and austere. She had been crying, the residue of frozen sobs forming shining silver and telling tear tracks down her cheeks.

She was a relic of war, once aflame and strutting with the determination and light-footed grace of the gods, now extinguished and solemn as a burnt match. Remnants of pain, treason, anger, resentment, fear, and all the ailments the world could afflict, all contained in one single rose.

Gazing out across the snowy, slanted expanse of her cabin's roof, she was focused on an invisible point along the horizon. A distant land only she could see that sat far, far past Snowchester's glacial sea. She had promised them all that one day, she'd fly away and go there. She was a million miles away already, riding on the waves and carried by the wind.

Sam placed his hand on hers and stopped her before she disappeared for good.

"Hey," he called softly.

She didn't say anything at first. Then, "Hey."

Her voice was hushed, close to a whisper. It was raspy and taunted. She coughed lightly to clear it.

Sam's hand still lingered on hers, resisting the urge to hold on any tighter.

"I just wanted to make sure you're alright," he said. His thumb began to softly rub over the bumps of her knuckles.

"Well, you've done that." Puffy pulled away and gripped the railing. "You can leave now."

Sam didn't want to, and he had a feeling that Puffy didn't want him to either. He stayed put, his eyes trailing down.

Her hands were still stained with blood. They left faint traces in the snow beneath her palms, and she hurried to try and wipe them against the snowflakes as best she could. She tried, but the marks were still there. Her movements became quicker and sharper, building up frantically until she gave up and held her head in her hands. She was shaking and shivering, and the bitter cold wasn't helping.

Sam quickly unclasped the cloak from around his shoulders and set it around her own.

Puffy shrugged him off, "I don't need it."

He tried again. "You're trembling."

"So?"

He insisted. "You'll catch a cold, or something worse."

"As if I care."

She snorted, turning her face away. Sam's grip on the fabric tightened, unsure of what to do or say. He couldn't leave her to freeze to death, no matter what.

"You may not, but I do. We can't have you wasting away."

When she didn't reply, Sam thought that he had finally talked some sense into her. He approached her once again, and got as far as laying his cape around her shoulders before she snapped her head towards him and twisted her body away.

"I don't need it!"

Her blazing eyes and harsh tone made up for her lack of height, especially when she abruptly squared up to him. She raised her hands, balling and un-balling them hesitantly. There was no way to tell if she was going to hit him in the chest, yank him angrily towards her, push him away, or simply tip him over the edge of the bannister.

Sam laid the cloak over the railing and vowed not to touch it for the rest of the night, even as the cold was starting to seep deeper and deeper into his own body. He could only imagine how frozen Puffy was, and resisted the urge to bring her into his arms.

"Don't even think about it," she muttered.

He hadn't realized that he had stepped forward with that exact intention.

Puffy began to pace back and forth in front of him, warm breath curling out of her like a dragon's fumes.

"I don't need you," she spat out, "I'm not weak!"

In any other case, Sam's stomach would have dropped to the deepest depths, weighed down by a feeling of inadequacy and self-loathing he could never shake off.

Tonight was different, much different.

He could tell that Puffy didn't mean what she was saying, the tremor in her voice betraying her uncertainty, as if she was only trying to convince herself of something absolutely ridiculous.

"You're stronger than anyone I know," he replied.

She *didn't* need him; she was capable and smart and wonderful enough to reap the ripe golden barley of success wherever she went.

She was always there for him, through confrontations, the Egg, Tommy's funeral and so much more. But Sam had suffered without her, deeply. The argument that had broken them apart had struck a streak of anger that he hadn't been able to control—Ponk and others had ended up being caught in the crossfire. He couldn't let that happen again.

Even if she didn't need him, he needed her. She was one of the few people that kept him sane in the warring hell that the SMP had become, and now he loved her as more than just his friend, just his rock.

She was his rose: deadly and thorned without knowing it, beautiful and kind without trying.

"Flattery gets you nowhere too," Puffy huffed.

"It's not flattery, it's the truth! What is this about, Puffy? Tell me!"

He watched as she came to a sudden halt. She wrapped her fingers around the snow covered railings again, and her lips began to move in silent mumbles.

"Just say you hate me, Sam!" she finally cried out loud. Her hands flew to her face, pushing her hair back and smearing faint red fingerprints over her frozen cheeks and forehead.

Sam was speechless for a grand total of a mere moment. "I could never," he protested, aghast. "I love you. I *love* you."

A confession, despite everything, had wormed its way out of him. Neither one noticed.

"Hate me."

"Then say you really want me to." He waited for her reply. All she did was stare back, tight-lipped and quiet. "You can't."

"I can't," she echoed. It was far from an affirmation— an observation. "I can't hurt you like this."

His heart skipped a beat. "Why?"

"Because it'll only hurt me more. I care about you, Sam, but gods, I wish I didn't."

She leaned forwards over the edge, staring out across the roof of her cabin and out into the sea.

"Every time you said you wish you couldn't love, that you couldn't feel or couldn't emote, I thought you were going insane with grief or anger or... Gods, you were right, Sam! You were right all along."

Sam swallowed hard. "I was wrong," he said, shaking his head, "I was so wrong."

"Love is just a game, and I've always lost at it one way or another."

She wasn't the only one.

"Puffy, you're scared, but throwing away your feelings is not worth it."

"You're one to give me a lecture."

"I've been there too, and I know how it feels, but it's *not* worth it, trust me."

Trust him. For the longest time, that's all he wanted anyone to do. Trust was what broke him and Puffy apart, and was one of the many things that kept them together, that *had* to keep them together.

"I trust you, Sam," Puffy said, turning away again. "But after what happened with Antfrost, how could you trust *me*?"

"Because I love you!"

She ignored him again, and went on. "I killed him, and for what?"

"To save me," Sam reminded her, only stepping closer every time she tried to step away, "you killed him to save me!"

"He was our friend!"

"And he's still alive, he's going to make it, Puffy!"

"Philza lied to you, he's going to bleed out all his lives and it'll be my fault!"

"Even if he does, you won't be to blame and I'll make sure no one ever does."

"Sam—"

"You wanted to save me and anyone who dares fault you for it will pay!"

"Shut up!"

"No, no I won't!" Sam raised his voice and watched her with a stern glare. He wasn't angry, just frustrated that nothing he was saying was amounting to anything. "You can't beat yourself up for something like this, there's no point! Antfrost is going to live and you rescued me, Captain. I owe you my life."

And my heart, and my soul, and everything else you want to take.

Puffy was shaking again, seething even, yet still looking away. "Just shut up!"

He narrowed his eyes. "Then fucking *make* me."

She turned back.

He held his head high, defiantly.

Both their breaths came out in short, sharp bursts, exhausted from the argument and waiting.

Waiting for something.

Sam had been expecting a string of insults, or a simple sentence that could shatter him to pieces. Even a physical fight seemed much more plausible than what happened next.

He was abruptly yanked downwards by the lapels of his waistcoat. A pair of icy lips smothered his own and bitterly frozen hands gripped his neck, sending electricity straight to his core. He froze up, the shock completely overwhelming his body.

He couldn't move.

He didn't *want* to move.

He didn't know what to do. His own feelings made the decision for him. In a flash, he relinquished all control.

Sam wrapped his arms around her, practically digging his fingers into her spine and her hips—anywhere he could somewhat still ground himself on. His grasp was bruising. He pushed her against the side of the windmill and kissed her back with an ardour, an energy and a desire he never knew he had in him.

He didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know if *she* knew what he was doing. What they were *both* doing. Both of them, completely clueless, completely infuriated, and too caught up in each other to care.

It was furious, it was desperate, it was rough, and it ended as quickly as it had begun. As swiftly as she had reeled him in, Puffy broke them apart.

Everything came crashing down. The pent-up fury came down with it, leaving nothing but a fearful tenderness behind.

Sam's mouth was hanging open, speechless. All that came out was a few, sparse breaths as he tried to process the last couple of seconds.

For the first time in forever, his brain failed, and all rational thought left him.

"Puffy?"

She stepped back, rigid. Horrified.

She just...

Gods, she really just...

And he—

"Puffy?"

She didn't even dare look at him, her frozen cheeks heating up hotter than the Nether itself. Every time she dared to, all she could see was his furrowed expression and a shocked face beet red from the neck up.

Hate me.

He probably did now.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out, screwing her eyes shut and balling her hands together. Her shaking legs dragged her backwards.

She wanted to run off, but no matter which direction she went, the balcony would always circle her back to him. And even if the windmill didn't bring her back, her mind and her heart definitely would. It was fruitless to even try to escape.

Instead, she rooted her hooves into the creaky wooden floor and, awaiting some sort of condemnation, let her head fall. She raised her hands to her temples, trying to channel out her conflicting feelings.

Silent thoughts became soft whispers, and soft whispers became full words. "I didn't mean to..."

Didn't mean to what? Get angry at him? Kiss him? Love him the way she did?

A hand reached out and rested on her shoulder, before hesitantly sliding down to her waist. She froze up. For a moment she was dazed and disoriented, and unable to move. Warm breath gently tickled her skin, so impossibly close. A hand ghosted over her cheek.

In a flash, everything was swiftly forgotten, from Antfrost to Puffy's dark thoughts. Instead, that powerful feeling she had tried so hard to push away invaded her mind, and her body along with it.

"Please," Sam murmured.

It was a desperate plea, a frantic demand, and a sincere question all at once.

His nose brushed against hers. He was red in the face and breathing heavily. His touches continued to linger, fleeting and nervous. She could feel his impatience, his eagerness—and yet he was still holding back. He was refusing to do anything more without her permission, without her letting him in. He was waiting for her, and only her.

It only made her heart yearn for him more.

And yet, she was still paralyzed to the spot, *why wasn't she moving—?*

Nothing happened for a long time. His fingers ended up resting on her jawline. She stayed as she was, frozen solid. Her breathing quickened and her cheeks turned brighter by the minute. The windmill continued to spin in lazy circles.

Then Time started again, with a disappointed sigh and a snap of its fingers.

"I'm sorry, this was a mistake."

Sam started to slip away. Slip away, flee, abandon her.

She couldn't let that happen, never again.

Puffy gripped his shoulders. "This isn't a mistake. I want this." That simple, breathless answer started to sink in fully, and truth continued to pour out. "I want this. I want you."

It was little more than a whisper, but loud enough to make him react. His chest rose with a shaking breath.

She felt him lean in closer, pulling her into him. A hand lingered near her waist again, a silent, subtle hint telling her that she could back out if she wanted to. Again, he was giving her a choice. She had already made it. She had a feeling she had done so a long time ago.

The windmill stopped turning for a moment.

"Puffy, my darling, we don't have to do this if you don't want to."

My darling.

She balled up the front of his shirt in her fists and closed her eyes.

She wanted to say so much more, to confess properly. She wanted to call him over and over, to make sure he knew she was talking to him, that she loved *him*. His lips reached hers before his name could.

In stark contrast to his impatience and the roughness of their first embrace, this kiss was gentle and soft. Chaste and shy, tentative, as if it was their first. It was savoured by something other than adrenaline. Slightly chapped lips from the cold pressed against hers. They were warm, strong, and a little rough around the edges. His embrace was a spitting image of him. It *was* him, and everything she loved about him.

She was completely weak at the knees by the time they parted, not without some love-stricken resistance.

"Is this alright?" Sam asked in a whisper. He adjusted his hold on her.

Her racing heart thumped wildly in her throat. She smiled at him. "Yeah," she murmured back. "This is perfect."

"Are you sure?"

She took his face between her hands and pressing a kiss to his brow.

"I'm sure," she whispered.

She didn't know if he had fallen for someone else before, if he had ever kissed or embraced someone as he did her. Puffy, however, was certain that no one had ever made him as beautiful and clumsy a mess as he was then.

Flushed red, speechless, pupils blown wide and hands trembling, so anxious about potentially breaking her. He was long gone, and it was all because of her.

He exhaled shakily. "My gods, you are... you... I..."

He didn't even finish his sentence, and eagerly fell once more back beneath the surface when she yanked him in.

The pungent taste of gunpowder left by his lips flowed through her: metallic, crackling and intoxicating, ready to explode at any moment. It was hypnotizing, and she wanted more.

She roughly pulled him closer to her, desperate to drink up every single drop. Her hands found their way to his shoulders, his neck and his hair. The red ribbon finally gave away under her touch after clinging on all night, and she relished in the feeling of his longer locks falling through her fingers.

She missed it when it was short, but then she also loved it when it was long, and...

Gods, she didn't care anymore. She loved *him*.

He opened his eyes, letting her see their dark, dreamy haze, before he pressed their foreheads together.

"You're beautiful," he murmured in close, intimate proximity. "I never told you that enough, but you're beautiful. So beautiful."

The hand on her side began to stroke the tattered, stained remains of the dress that had once made her feel so utterly gorgeous. Now far worse for wear, she started to come to terms with the idea that Sam loved her with or without it in shambles.

The idea that Sam loved her, period, regardless of anything else.

The last remains of her lipstick left faint traces against his lips and everywhere else she had kissed him, his hair was let down and blowing in the wind, and his fine clothes were covered in ash and soot. He was no longer the prim and proper king she had first imagined, but still a king after all. Above all, he was smiling more than she had ever seen him do.

"I am so in love with you," he breathed out.

"Really?" she teased, her mouth tugging up into a smile. "I could *never* have guessed."

He tipped his head back, laughing, before leaning in again and placing a nervous peck on her cheek. She leaned in to him and tightened her grip on his shoulders. That seemed to trigger something, light a fuse. Chaste sweetness became searing fire. His kisses turned into a mix of soft and rough, long and short. He was trying to understand her, to see what she liked and where. It amounted to nothing, as every one of his embraces made her head spin in starry circles. Sam seemed to be just as desperate as she was, and continued to press deep kisses to her chilled skin like there was no tomorrow, like he was worshipping a goddess. He started with her forehead then embraced his way down to her nose, her jaw, her chin, until finally his lips landed directly over the dark purple bruises decorating her throat.

Sam's soft kiss turned into Punz's painful, vengeful grip, and she suddenly shoved him away.

"I'm sorry," she immediately apologized.

He nervously held her gaze. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you didn't, it's just..."

She trailed off and rubbed a hand over her neck, focusing on her breathing as she tried to smooth out the offending fingerprints.

Sam noticed. He softly pried her hand away, took one look at the bruises and scowled.

"I'll make them pay," he promised in a low, threatening growl.

"One day, maybe."

She would have quite liked to deal with Punz herself, but right now, she couldn't care less.

She buried her face in Sam's shoulder—*her* spot on his shoulder. She closed her eyes.

His dark, earthy musk of gunpowder and her soft, salty tang of the sea, so close together, and so perfectly imperfect when hand in hand. She inhaled it all deeply. It was the only oxygen she needed then and there. She couldn't speak, and neither could he. She didn't want to. This meant far more than anything any of them could have ever said.

For what felt like an eternity, there wasn't a word exchanged between them, simply absent-minded nuzzles and caresses that soothed them both. The snow continued to fall, peppering Puffy's skin with small, cold arrows. She couldn't feel them, too warm and blissed out to care. The dull, muffled sounds of their rooftop hideaway was all that rose to her ears. The gentle crunch of the snow beneath her hooves, the creaking of the windmill, the beating of their hearts, and the few, scarce breaths that passed between them.

The addicting smell of burning still lingered in the air, even after their charred clothes had cooled. The same firm yet gentle hand that had led her during their waltz rested on her waist. Sam was strong and held her in place effortlessly. All she could do was embrace him back and melt beneath him.

She tilted her head to the side and swept a soft hand underneath Sam's chin. She thumbed over his jaw, his stubble, and his lips. His eyes stared into hers, loving and affectionate and ever so adoring. It had been so long since someone had looked at her like that.

She had forgotten what falling in love was like, and the utter bliss and jubilation of being loved in return.

"Tonight," Sam began with a shaky tone, "when you were dancing with Bad, I was jealous—so jealous. Technoblade tried to talk me out of it and I didn't listen. I was so angry, and sad, and worried, and... I decided I should finally be honest with myself, and with you."

"How long have you—"

"When I thought I'd never see you again and die alone in the tundra."

The reply came swiftly, without any hesitation, therefore could have been nothing but the truth. The truth, and a clear confession that had been rehearsed too many times to count.

"Oh, Sam..."

"Up on the mountain, I wanted to kiss you so badly—gods, it *hurt*. And then down in the snow, and when you first put on that dress, and when we danced at the banquet, and... I've been madly in love with you for ages. I just want you, and only you. Everything's been about you." Sam's voice trembled again, and he bowed his head into her shoulder. "Losing you almost killed me. I'm a mess, and I've made too many mistakes to count. I've done terrible things, I've hurt other people, and I've hurt you. I don't want you to forgive me, I just want you to give me a chance to be better."

"As long as you give me that same chance too."

"Puffy, no. You don't need it, you're an angel."

"Then neither do you." She made him face her again. "We either both change, or we stay as we are."

"You're the brave, strong, beautiful sea captain I fell in love with, and I don't want that to disappear."

Puffy brushed their noses together, suppressing a giggle. "And you, sir, are the insufferable, cocky, pretentious idiot who saved me from the sea," she teased. "You're my saviour, my best friend and my handsome, golden-hearted beloved. You're *my* Sam, and nothing will ever change that."

My Sam.

It sounded so strange, and yet it didn't. It was the first time those words had left her mouth, but it was almost like they had always been strung together, simply waiting for the right moment to escape.

Her Sam.

And she was his.

"Insufferable, huh?"

"I think the word I'm looking for might be 'unbearable', actually."

"Is that so?" Sam purred, nipping gently at the soft skin beside her ear. "Call me that again and you'll get what's coming to you..."

There was no anger behind his words, but rather a subtle, playful warning that promised something else entirely. She couldn't hide the redness that flushed her cheeks, nor the small part of her that wanted to keep pushing his buttons just a little bit longer.

Just out of curiosity.

"And what will that be?" she probed, smirking slyly. "Go on, spit it out."

He began to laugh and she joined in. Their noses touched for a moment, and she felt his whole body sink pleasantly into the touch.

She dove into the depths of her mind and pondered.

None of this was an impulsive decision. She didn't suddenly wake up one day and decide that she was in love with one of her best friends.

Then, that begged a bigger question: when did her feelings for him change exactly?

It would have made sense if it was when he was dying in the Vault, her buried emotions using the tragedy as a way to finally come to light, but it wasn't that. She would have felt a sudden change, and yet there had been none that marked her like the one that had apparently scarred Sam.

She searched further and further back, through all her lovesick pining for Nikki, Tommy's death, all the other snippets of agony... until she finally hit the one, *the* moment.

And it was something she had all but forgotten about. "Gods, I've just realized."

"What?"

"I've loved you since you made that stupid, stupid mistake in your letter!" She tipped her head back and laughed loudly, the silliness of it all coming back.

"Which mistake?"

"You know perfectly well you made only one, but I mean, come on! '*My dearest Puffy*', with a comma in the wrong place. It kept me awake for two days straight! That's so dumb!"

She had no proof of it anymore, having burned the letters in another frenzy of grief and denial, but it had been there and the flash of recognition that lit up Sam's expression confirmed it.

"*My dearest, Puffy,*" Sam quoted with a grin, emphasizing the brief pause—the "mistake"—on purpose. "I don't know if I'd call that a mistake anymore. You could maybe say it was meant to be."

Puffy rolled her eyes and cupped his face between her hands. "You're such an idiot," she groaned, pulling him in and shutting him up with another embrace.

That one lasted only a brief moment or two, ending abruptly when Sam hissed in pain. He parted their lips, face twisted in agony. Immediately, Puffy dropped her hands.

"Sam?"

"I'm fine, really."

He leaned back and dragged his fingers through his hair, groaning to himself. It was only then that she realized how stiff his hands were, and how red his white shirt really was.

Immediately, Puffy snapped to attention. Her hand went back up to his cheek where she thumbed over a few thin but deep claw marks. Out of the corner of her eye, she also took note of the makeshift torque tied around a prominent injury on his arm.

Her Sam, broken and bleeding, but still selfless and downright modest enough to ignore it until then.

"You're hurt!"

"I'm fine—"

Before Sam could stop her, she slipped off one of his gloves, and held his hand up to her face. Her fingers brushed over his palm and the rest of his calloused, redstone-stained hand, trailing soft touches up to his wrist and back. Even through the material, Ant's claws had raked his skin to shreds.

"I'm alright, really," Sam tried to protest again. She inadvertently pressed against a particularly painful nick, and he winced.

"Oh no you don't!" Puffy huffed, her tone bordering on berating. "We're going back inside and we're going to clean you up, right now."

"But—"

"Now."

She held out her hand and waited until Sam took it before guiding him back to the stairs. When they reached the door, he suddenly dipped her down and kissed her deeply underneath the slowly turning sails of the windmill that sheltered them from the snow and any potential, prying eyes.

Puffy couldn't help but sigh when he pulled away with an endearing, dopey smile, "I'm not going to get anything done with you around, am I?"

"Well, that'll be a sacrifice you'll have to make," he hummed.

"I certainly will."

She beckoned him through the door and down the windmill's spiraling staircase. They tiptoed past a sleeping Michelle—momentarily stopping to make sure she was alright—and made their way into the main cabin.

Everything was quiet, and even the fire had stopped sparking and burning. Nothing seemed to be stirring upstairs either and although Puffy panicked at first, she also realized that was a good thing.

It was silent, but there were no sobs of any kind. Chances were that Velvet had fallen asleep, his panic over Antfrost subsided.

Everything was well, very well.

"Sit," Puffy demanded, patting one of the armchairs beside the fire. "Shirt off. Let me clean those before they get infected."

"Aye aye, Captain."

Sam had always thought that the hardest part of that night would be infiltrating the Red Banquet. That, of course, had been until Puffy had kissed him. Then, he truly had to face her, face himself, face what he wanted to say and do.

It had all paid off, and he was on cloud nine.

Meanwhile, the captain turned to the fireplace and relit it, plunging their dark, dismal surroundings back into a cozy orange glow. She then walked over to the kitchen and got a few supplies, before coming back over and pulling up a stool in front of Sam.

Now his waistcoat and his shirt were peeled off completely, Sam finally began to feel the sting of his injuries. Scratch marks tore all down his back, over his shoulders and across his chest, piecing together a red, ragged masterpiece against his pale skin and clusters of forest green freckles. His exhausted muscles burned him, made worse by the countless bruises and burns he had sustained that evening. He took in the aching of his entire body, groaning quietly to himself.

A warm, damp cloth coupled with a pair of soft hands began to trace over his wounds, cleaning off the grime and congealed blood. Every scratch stung when it was touched and every one received a soft, gentle caress to match.

He inhaled, and closed his eyes. It was doing more good than any Healing potion ever could. He would have been lying if he didn't admit that he started losing himself a little.

"Open your eyes, you're making this weird."

He opened one and raised an eyebrow. "You're the one who wanted me to strip."

"I never said it like that and you know it."

Her cheeks had turned bright red once again and she purposely averted her gaze. He tilted his head down to catch her eyes with a teasing grin, only to have her tip his jaw up again.

"I can't reach them if you keep fidgeting."

"Doesn't matter, because I'm fi—*fuck!*"

He cried out as a particularly nasty scratch on his collarbone was tended to, a little more roughly than was necessary.

Puffy smirked, "My hand slipped."

He swiped at her, playfully tutting and cursing her out. She lay an apologetic hand on his shoulder, and it stayed there. It stayed there a rather long time.

The impending swell of an explosion rose up again inside him, and this time it was more than welcome.

It was unfamiliar compared to the feeling that constricted his breathing with anger, jealousy, sadness or paranoia, and he hadn't felt the change in ages. It was a good change. If he had to live the rest of his last life with it, he would be happy to do so.

And from the way Puffy had chased his kisses and he could taste his own gunpowder on her lips, he had a feeling that she didn't mind it either.

Slowly, Sam guided her hand down to his heart and held it there tightly. He could feel it drum under their fingers, quick but steady. The playful, teasing demeanor he had adopted to make her laugh—because, *gods*, he could never get enough of her smile!—momentarily vanished.

"This is what you do to me," he whispered, continuing to hold her hand still.

This, his racing heart, continued to beat. No longer regular, it began to go haywire. He wouldn't have it any other way.

She gently moved their hands to her own chest, to the bare skin just above the hemline of her dress. He could feel her breast swell with each breath she took and underneath it, her heart. It was thundering just as quickly and madly as his own.

"And you to me," she whispered.

"I want to love you like this forever," he blurted out fervently, like a desperate prayer.

She smiled, pressing her forehead to his. "I'd like that a lot."

In a instant, his wounds were all but forgotten.

He pulled her up from her seat and onto his lap, tangling his fingers in her curls and pushing her closer to him. He gently kissed her forehead, then her nose, then her cheeks, and finally her lips, over and over again. He made sure to keep his touches away from her neck at all costs.

She was burning and melting beneath his hands, her chilled skin from outside finally warming up. She soon went from bitterly frozen to unbearably sweltering, so stifling that he had to pull away for fear of suffocating them both.

"You're hot," he remarked, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand.

"You're one to talk, handsome."

He leaned in to try to kiss her again, only for her to teasingly twist out of his reach. Puffy leaned over and grabbed her medical supplies again. "If you love me, you need to let me take care of you."

Just like that, he turned into nothing more than putty in her touch. She continued to wash over the smaller scratches on his hands and dabbing the blood off the still bleeding ones, then took care of the wound on his arm. It was deeper than all the others, but not deep enough to be considered too serious. It was cleaned and bandaged up in no time.

"Wait, Sam!"

He looked down to where Puffy was holding up his forearm to the light of the fire. The dark spots where his three—sorry, *two* lives were tattooed were still there. He gulped.

"Yeah, I know," he said, "I was an idiot and lost one to Las Nevadas, and then—"

"No, look!"

Puffy traced his skin. Sam still didn't understand. He squinted closer. Then he realized. His mouth hung open, and he pried his forearm from Puffy's hands.

"It's healed!"

Finally, the gaping, pus-filled sores that had tarnished and pained him for ages, stubbornly refusing to heal despite everything he had tried, had vanished without a trace. There wasn't even a single scar or blemish left behind, and with them had evaporated all the horrors of Sam's captivity down in the Egg's cavern. He shakily brushed his thumb over where they used to be, still letting it all sink in. But if they had finally healed, that meant—

"It's gone," Puffy breathed out. "The Egg is gone."

The Egg was gone.

For a moment, neither of them moved, still too stunned to speak. Then with a loud, relieved laugh, Puffy threw her arms around his neck and squeezed his breath right out of him. Sam too allowed himself a smile and a laugh of victory, before wrapping his own arms around her and burying his face in her shoulder, rocking them both back and forth.

He wanted to scream to the high heavens, he wanted to curse, he wanted to cry—all of them in pure and utter relief.

At last, it was all over.

"We did it, Sam," Puffy exclaimed again, cupping his face between her hands and breathing hard. "We did it! The Egg's gone, it's gone..."

The Egg wasn't gone, not yet at least.

Oh, it was agonizing, and was most definitely going to die before the sun came up. Its hold had been growing weaker and weaker by the minute. It wasn't hissing or talking to Bad anymore—he had chucked off the ruby pendant as soon as he had burst out of the cavern—but scraps of it were still there, everywhere. The demon could feel it; that familiar, uncomfortable sensation that made his skin crawl and his heart race.

It was the one that had woken him up one night, when the Egg had been nothing more than an underground anomaly, and had made him run to Antfrost's room in the White Mansion, only to find him pacing with newly crimson eyes.

Antfrost is dead. He's dead, he's dead, he's dead—

It was the one that had plagued him for days when Skeppy had decided to lock himself in with the scarlet beast and came out half-dead.

My back burns.

It was the one that had pushed him to threaten Ranboo, Puffy and everyone else.

It was the one that had made him leave Sam to the mercy of Pandora's Vault, or rather the lack of.

Something was still happening despite the battle and the devastating fire. Bad had an inkling where, and what was at stake.

So he ran.

He knew he should have stayed behind and bent to the justice of his peers, answered their harsh questions and accepted his punishment, but his fear was far too great.

He ran off as fast as he could without a word, drawing no attention except from the Eggpire themselves.

With no omnipresent leader to bow down to anymore and only a frightful punishment before them if they surrendered, they latched on to the only other figure of authority they had left: Bad. When their leader ran, they scattered too.

The demon wanted to send them away, to yell at them, to blame them all—and yet when faced with their fading infections and panicked faces, he had a change of heart. He implored them all to flee to the South, past Kinoko and to the mountain range beyond. He promised he'd join them soon.

Then he continued down his own path.

The moment he arrived at the White Mansion, he threw himself at the doors and yanked them right open. They banged against the entrance and shook the entire building, rattled the windows and unhinged the doors. The distant rumble of an oncoming storm echoed out across the moore.

The gods that Bad had forgotten for ages were angry. They wanted revenge, they wanted an apology for his heresy.

They had waited for a couple of years – the demon was certain they could wait a few minutes more.

The doors slammed behind him. The main hall was dark, the only light coming from the cracked open doors of the rooms he passed, dimly lit by the moonlight.

Only one slip of light burned brighter than the other, tainted with a warm, welcoming gold.

Bad slowed his sprint to a stop. "Skeppy?" he called out.

His voice bounced off the marble walls and silk Eggpire banners, echoing in the silent, empty mansion. He tried to call again, if only to try and fill the deafening quiet that only made his fear greater.

With heavy but determined steps, he made his way towards the golden crack, and pushed open the door.

All at once, the welcoming atmosphere disappeared. The demon stepped inside, anxiously darting wary glances into the shadows.

The room seemed to be perfectly normal. Basked in the dark velvet of the night, it was only lit up by the soft orange glow of the smouldering fire in the hearth. The curtains

were drawn shut, and everything was quiet. There was a figure stretched out on one of the sofas, bundled up in a blanket with his covered face turned towards the hearth.

Everything was normal, and yet Bad couldn't shake off the feeling that something was wrong – very wrong.

He made his way over to the sleeping figure, and allowed himself to relax a little. He smiled softly, and gently shook his shoulder.

"Hey, muffinhead," he whispered, "I'm back."

Skeppy didn't wake.

"Things, uh, didn't go to plan tonight, unfortunately."

But Skeppy was still there, sleeping peacefully. He wasn't strung up, kidnapped, or completely infected again, and that was all that Bad had hoped for. He was safe. But Skeppy still didn't wake up.

Perhaps that was for the best.

Bad sank down a little further, one hand still on Skeppy's shoulder. "Yeah, not well at all... I don't know what they'll do to me now, to us. They'll think you're a part of all this too. We need to leave, at least for a while."

Skeppy didn't say anything. It was starting to get a little much.

"So you're absolutely fine with this?" Bad asked, rolling his eyes. "I mean, great, but I was expecting you to yell at me or something. I deserve it."

When the silence still dragged on, Bad's mild annoyance grew into full on frustration.

"Are you pranking me, Skeppy?" He shook him again. "It's not funny."

Skeppy had always been good at pranks, but would usually crack after a few pressing questions and an outburst from Bad. But this one, he seemed pretty committed to, and remained as he was.

Bad's anger faltered. "Skeppy...?"

He tapped his shoulder and when that too failed, tugged the blanket off from over his chin. His best friend's mouth was hanging open, but no breath was coming out.

At first thinking it was a trick of the light and his tired eyes, Bad didn't think too much of it, at least until he pressed a hand to his chest. Again, no air seemed to be escaping, and there was no heartbeat.

No heartbeat.

Bad ripped the rest of the blanket off his friend, and gaped at the sight of all his limbs tangled and tied up by blood red ropes and twine. They slithered all over his body like viscous worms, still pulsating.

The demon's first reaction was to leap at them and tear them off, only to have the last remnants of the Egg crumble in his hands like dry autumn leaves, dead and rotten.

Frozen to the spot, he let the ashes run through his fingers and fall to the floor, waiting until the last crumb left his skin.

Then, he faced the inevitable.

Skeppy's face was colder than the diamonds that encrusted it, and strange markings wrapped around his throat like rope burns, cutting deep and red raw. But that wasn't the work of a simple rope, far from it.

All at once, Bad's entire being drained from his body, leaking out of his back wound like his own blood. He couldn't even feel the gnash anymore.

He said and did nothing except sliding Skeppy's limp body off the sofa and into his lap. He held him tight, rocking them back and forth.

Skeppy had other lives – the demon knew that and had even double checked before leaving for the Banquet that evening – and the next one would kick in soon, as they always did.

That still didn't change anything. It didn't change the fact that Skeppy had been killed, by none other than the Egg itself.

The Egg that had promised to heal him.

It had stabbed Bad in the back and in a final, petty gesture before it finally disappeared and burned down, had used its last ounces of strength to murder what its most loyal disciple loved most.

Bad had never fallen into madness before.

Indoctrinated into preaching false truths and pledging his loyalty to the wrong cause, perhaps. But pure and utter madness, the kind that came with bloodshed, ambition, fear, jealousy, grief—never.

Until then.

Bad screamed. He dropped Skeppy's body and tore his own mask off. Throwing it across the room, it landed in the fire and quickly curled up in flames. Then, he threw himself at the sofa where his friend once lay, claws raking the soft plush to shreds. Stuffing flew in every direction and landed with the grace of fresh fallen snow, the claw marks akin to bright white lightning against a cushioned sky of dark velvet. Bad continued to rip up the entire seat, searching for a single red vine just to have the pleasure of dealing with it himself.

He stared up at the skies and screamed again, begging the gods for one stupid answer.

Why had they let it happen? Why?

"Why?!"

Bad began to pace the room. Everything he touched, or so much as brushed, he broke and destroyed, from vases to tables and sideboards.

He was being watched. He knew he was being watched.

The large, beautiful oil painting above the mantelpiece, still agonizingly magnificent.

Antfrost still looked too scared, Sam too stern, and Bad too dangerous

Antfrost was dead, Sam was a vengeful ghost, and Bad was going insane.

He didn't even need a stool to reach it, and jumped up as high as he could. He tore the whole picture off the wall and threw it to the floor. The golden frame splintered with a snap, and the canvas rippled on impact.

Bad's claws shakily reached out towards the painted faces, their intricate details, exquisiteness of their clothes, the imperfections only Bad could see. He traced each one carefully.

Then with a deafening war cry, he dug his claws in and slashed the painting in one fell swoop. Then he did so again, and again, and again, until the figures were mutilated beyond recognition.

His Badlands were lost. They were lost, and it was all his fault.

Bad staggered over to the window and sank to his knees, taking the curtains down with him. They fell heavily on top of him, imprisoning him in a soft, dark cocoon. The drapes sheltered him from everything, from the carnage of the room to the looming shadow of Pandora's Vault sitting along the coastline.

Then, Bad allowed himself to finally breathe. In, and out. In, and out.

His hands hurt, his claws hurt, his back hurt. His throat was rubbed raw. His heart was completely and utterly shattered.

In, and out.

It was stupid to think that a demon could have ever been anything but good, or do anything right, especially one as gullible and weak as Bad.

His cell was nice and warm. He liked the curtains. He could live there forever.

Forever lasted only a few minutes. Something broke the silence.

"It's open!"

The doors to the White Mansion were flung open again, their loud banging followed by a stampede of armoured footsteps.

"There isn't anyone here," Eret's voice echoed through the empty halls.

Quackity replied soon after, *"Look, there's blood on the floor. The bastard's somewhere."*

"My men will follow the trail, you get yours to check the other rooms."

Foolish hadn't turned up to the masquerade, but seemingly had no qualms with playing an active part in Bad's arrest.

The demon drew a fold of the curtains away and peeked out. Through the crack in the door, flaming lights danced through the empty darkness. Faraway rooms were broken into and torn apart in the search. Thundering feet grew closer and closer.

Bad could stay hidden if he wanted to, warm and comfortable in his velvet nest. His shaking would give him away, however, and he decided against it.

He crawled out of the pile of curtains and staggered to his feet, still unstable in so many ways. His eyes landed on Skeppy's unmoving body, abandoned in the middle of the demon's maddened outburst. He was so peaceful, he was so peaceful...

He was breathing again.

Bad was about to run up to him and scoop him up, when justice finally came knocking.

"Stop right there!" yelled a guard, his torch held high and menacingly towards him. His cry was loud enough to alert the rest of the army, and before long, more knights and soldiers swarmed in through the threshold.

Bad should have given up and surrendered. He wanted to, in part. But the animalistic instincts and the madness that had overcome him were far from gone.

Only one thought was still sane, and that was the heavy realization that whatever happened, he couldn't take Skeppy down with him.

Not again.

Bad glanced once more at the armed inquisition, staring Eret, Quackity and Foolish down as they rushed in behind them. He then turned around, broke the nearest window, and escaped into the night.

Chapter Sixty-Six: One Love, One Lifetime

There was rarely a good, clear morning in the tundra. The sky stayed as the bleak, white canvas it usually was, lit up only by a blinding sun that no one remembered seeing rising in the first place.

Yet occasionally, very rarely, dawn actually took its time to break. Pastel colours flooded the horizon, and the sun's rays became soft and golden, bathing the snowy landscape in a warmth much nicer than any roaring fire could provide.

Such a sunrise had made its appearance the morning after the Red Banquet, and Technoblade breathed it in.

The gods were smiling down upon him and so it seemed were the voices. They had silenced for the time being, undoubtedly just as exhausted as the piglin himself was, lulling in the vast warmth of his mind.

"Do I really need to do this?"

Techno turned to the bed beside him. It had belonged to Ranboo, then to Sam, and now it was Ranboo's again. The hybrid was sprawled out on top of the mattress, covers and blankets twisted underneath him. Propped up with a pillow, he grimaced at the book in his lap with disdain.

Hiding his smile, Techno leaned against the windowsill and shot him a look. "Yes, Ranboo, you do. I don't want to hear you complaining about being bored."

"But this is even worse," Ranboo whined, tilting his head backwards with a groan. The leather volume began to slip off him, and Technoblade caught it right before it hit the floor.

"You shouldn't have played the hero and broken your wrist then."

Ranboo glanced down at his heavily bandaged wrist, then back up at the piglin with an eye roll. "I'm tired..."

"You weren't until I gave you something to do." He tapped the book to prove his point, then gave it back to Ranboo.

"That thing is more powerful than morphine."

"Keep this up and I'll have you write an essay about it too."

Technoblade couldn't remember when Ranboo had become so whiny. The last time he had laid in that bed, he had been crying uncontrollably into the piglin's shoulder and begging for his forgiveness for something that wasn't his fault.

Now, he was openly talking back and muttering under his breath. With a smirk, Techno realized that he liked the change. He also liked the vulnerable moments the hybrid let him see.

He just enjoyed taking care of Ranboo in all his states, period.

The part of Techno that still held grudges against children sparked up, condemning him for finding any of Ranboo's attitudes endearing. But Techno had learned to be stronger in recent times, and brushed it aside.

His recent entourage had definitely rubbed off on him. It seemed that his orphan slaughtering days were well and truly over... until the voices staged a coup d'état over his senses, that was.

"Hey mate, do you have anything for the fish?"

Philza ducked into Technoblade's cabin, and Ranboo's priorities changed.

"Phil, please, he's trying to bore me to death!" the hybrid yelped, reaching his good hand out to the avian.

Phil ruffled his salt and pepper hair before glancing at Technoblade. "I'm afraid he's having too much fun," he teased.

Ranboo groaned loudly again and fell back into his pillows. "I'm going to sleep..."

No matter how much he wanted to torture him further, Technoblade didn't insist. He closed "The Art of War" and placed it on a nearby chest, then made Ranboo swallow a couple of drops of Healing before letting him hunker down for another undoubtedly long slumber.

He knew another kid like that once, a certain golden-haired gremlin known as Tommy. When the boy had come to stay with him during his exile, Techno had thought that he would never get a moment of peace again. The piglin had acted more like a babysitter than a powerful ally at that time, but strangely enough, Tommy didn't seem to mind.

And funnily enough, neither did Techno.

Those happy times ended sourly, and that was no secret to anyone. Yet still, seeing Tommy's fireworks painting the sky the night before put a large smile on his face. Tommy had made those with Technoblade. They had done that *together*.

Despite everything, there were a few things that still made the piglin's chest swell with pride regarding his bedrock brother to this day.

But those times with Tommy were over. Now, he had Ranboo.

"You are truly evil," Philza whispered, cackling under his breath.

The piglin shrugged, chuckling too. "Gotta keep the brand up, even with the sweet little Ender boy here." He adjusted the hybrid's quilt fondly. Then, he remembered his best friend's initial request. "Fish?"

Philza gestured to the two glass orbs in his arms. Techno had only briefly made the acquaintance of Sapnap's fish when he first brought them out of his pack. Their respective homes were made of clear, secure glass, capped with a reinforced and ornate golden hatch. They looked more like cells than actual fishbowls, but with what the piglin knew of Sapnap's history, it was understandable.

Anyways, Mars and Beckerson seemed happy enough, swimming around aimlessly and gazing at Techno with their big, bulging eyes and derped out expressions.

"I'm just looking after them until Sapnap comes back," Phil said, then frowned.

The piglin lowered his gaze. Sapnap's decision to go back to Kinoko had been a sudden one, and one that had torn Technoblade apart with worry.

Sapnap was an outcast. He had been threatened with execution, and yet he still decided to go back with the man who exiled him, to the kingdom he burned.

"If he dies, he'll be remembered as an idiot," Technoblade grumbled, his own words bittersweet on his tongue.

"I sent the crows to check on everyone earlier," said Phil. "Sapnap's safe."

"And Nikki?"

"Tired, but alright. She'll visit later to check on Ranboo."

"And Sam?"

"Happy. He's happy."

Techno didn't bother hiding his smile. "Need I ask why?"

Phil was smiling too. "I think you know full well."

"Good for them both."

He wished them all the best, but something still tugged at his mind. The tundra was quiet, too quiet. Peaceful. Even the kennels were silent.

Normally, Techno would hear a chorus of loud barking, followed by a flaming string of empty threats as Sapnap brought the dogs their daily meals.

Normally, Sam and Techno would be sparring, an activity which always ended in some form of a friendly but competitive snowball fight.

Normally, Philza would take Ranboo and Nikki on fast, winding sled rides over the snowdrifts. Their cries could be heard from miles around, bouncing off the ice and carried by the wind.

Normally, everyone would come back cold and sneezing, and get comfortable in Techno's cabin for a long, warm evening filled with hot food, jokes and games.

Normally, normally, normally.

Now there was only silence – a good silence, but a silence nevertheless.

And with the good fortunes Philza had just told him... Techno began to regret a few things.

Well, at least they all had a magnificent send-off. The Egg was finally gone, and the completely healed scar on Techno's arm could attest to that fact.

"So," he sighed, "is this it?"

"Is what it?"

"Is this how the tundra's going to be now, just me, you and Ranboo? Alone again."

"Well, Nikki's probably still going to visit, she always does, but..." Philza trailed off, and sighed. "Yeah, I guess it is, mate."

"Feels weird," the piglin grunted. He looked down at the large, silver dog lying across Ranboo's legs and scratched her between her ears. "We've still got Sapnap's fish and Sam's dog though, we could hold them hostage."

Fran lifted her head from her slumber, giving Technoblade an unimpressed glare. He patted her again, apologizing.

"Hey, mate, just because they're not going to be living with us anymore doesn't mean that they're not our friends anymore."

"I know, I know, but still."

It was strange. Technoblade, the feared warrior with the bloodthirsty voices, with a tempest of violence always flowing in his wake like a gushing river, had always wanted his moments of quiet – but when a well-deserved one finally arrived, he found himself wishing for some noise again, some action.

He'd get it, soon enough. He was sure of that.

Nevertheless, the present was nice in its own way. Peaceful. There was no point in dwelling over the past, or hoping for the future, at least not now.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Just for a moment.

The world had been bathed in scarlet and crimson for as long as Antfrost could remember, and nothing else. The trees were stained with blood, the ground was soaked by wine, and the sky was painted with the tint of the dreaded red mornings – constantly. Everywhere he had looked for the past couple of years, he had seen nothing but red. Red, and the Egg.

Now all that was gone, and his canvas had been drained. He opened his eyes and everything was blank, colourless, sucked of life.

He could feel the colours, however. The warm rays of a golden sun filtered through a window, and the tip of his tail brushed the dark mahogany of a bed stand.

He opened his mouth to do... something. Yawn, or maybe cry out in pain. In the end, all that escaped was a groan.

A groan that was immediately followed by a cry of surprise. "Ant?"

An angel leaned over him, just as white and pure as everything else around him. An angel with a faint outline and fuzzy features so familiar that Ant was rendered speechless. He came to only one conclusion.

"Am... Am I dead?"

All of it was far too good and unbelievable to be true. He was dead, he had to be. And yet, the hand that stroked his fur was all too real.

"Am I dreaming?" replied the angel, tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

Why was he crying? Angels never cried.

It took Antfrost a moment or two to remember what joy could do to someone. He had seen so little of it in recent months.

"I... don't think so."

Ant could feel the soft cotton blankets and covers. He could feel the clotted hole in his chest. He could feel the fingers tickle the fluff around his neck. He didn't feel dead.

Only one thing still made him doubt it all. "You can't be real... Velvet can't be here..."

He reached out his paw. It was heavy and stiff, laden with lead and threatening to plummet back down. The angel's soft, supple fingers held his own, guiding him towards his face. The pads of his paws brushed the other's cheek, and colour gushed back to his vision like a torrent.

Cherry red hair, aquamarine eyes and a delicate, rosy pink blush that spread underneath his touch and warmed his entire being.

There it was, the final thread that pulled everything together and stitched it all up. A waterfall welled in his eyes, and his grip on the angel's cheek tightened. He wanted to drag the divinity down below the sea with him, no matter how deep or difficult it would be. He just wanted to be with him.

"Velvet?"

"Antfrost," the other murmured, "my Ant."

My Velvet.

Antfrost burst into tears.

"It's alright, I'm here," Velvet hummed, his voice dripping with soothing, honey-sweet comfort. An angel, his angel, through and through.

The cat said nothing, just curling into his beloved's touch. In a flash, he had regressed back into a kitten, a naive little ball of wispy down who knew nothing of the world and thought the biggest mistake he could ever make was accidentally claw the curtains. How wrong he had been, how blissfully ignorant.

"I'm sorry," he choked. Vivid but brief flashes of horrifying scenes invaded his mind, and in the middle of it all stood Velvet, so small and terrified. Ant didn't know what he had done to him. He dreaded the answer. "I'm sorry..."

"I'm sorry I took so long to come to you."

"The Egg," Ant whispered. "The Egg stopped you from coming... It... It was holding me prisoner."

"I know, I know... Just breathe. You're safe."

The whole truth dawned on him at once. The Egg, everything was the Egg's doing. How could he ever think it was justified, any of it? What had it done to him? What had he become?

The voices were no longer there to answer him. The voices were no longer there.

He was free. Was he free?

He brushed a hand over his chest, his breath hitching as he applied pressure on his sternum. It burned. The bandages were rough and scratchy, one of the only clues he still had of the evening he could barely remember.

"It hurts," he admitted.

Velvet swatted his paw away from his wound and after a small forehead kiss, stood up. "I'll take care of it."

Once Velvet had left his bedside, Antfrost tipped his head back and sunk into the pillows. He felt stiff, very stiff, and sore all over. Even just turning his head towards the window was a feat and a half. It was snowing outside, the flakes rushing past the glass in ropes and briefly shadowing the pools of light the morning cast across the floor.

His brief few words to Velvet hurt his throat. A spiked ball had been rising in his throat, impaling him at every syllable. Eventually, it had become too painful to say anything at all. He wanted to tell his beloved so much more than what he did – what a reunion it could have been if he could just talk.

Instead, he had to waste his few breaths on worthless apologies and choked sobs.

"He's awake, and he's alright!"

Velvet's beautiful voice echoed loudly, slowly ascending from below. He was accompanied by the gentle thunder of hooves against wood, and Antfrost turned his head back.

There, climbing up the last few stairs, was his beloved, followed by a figure the cat hadn't expected to see. Why was she here too?

He had hurt her in so many ways, just as he had hurt everyone. Now, faced with an exhausted, bruised ghost of her, complete with a torn and bloody dress, he began to dread what else he had done that he was unaware of.

"Ant, can you hear me?" Puffy called, cantering over to his bedside. She was smiling brightly, relieved.

Silently, he nodded, and her face began to fall.

"Forgive me," she whispered, sinking down beside him. Her blue eyes, so shining and bubbly, had turned glassy and solemn, even more so when she took his paw and kissed it gently. "I'm sorry..."

He didn't know what she was sorry for. Sorry that he wasn't dead? He couldn't blame her.

He nodded again, this time a little more unsure of what she did or didn't want to hear. The captain let out a shaky breath and stood up, turning away towards the wall while anxiously biting her nails. Velvet followed her and they began to talk in hushed, trembling voices.

If Antfrost tried, he could have eavesdropped easily, and yet he decided against it. All his attention was entranced by only one thing, one person.

He had been pining for years and years, and now he was here he was blowing his chances of being forgiven and showing him how much he truly meant to him.

If Ant could only have a few words more, he wanted to make them count more than ever.

"Velvet."

He got up from his bed with some difficulty. The floor span before him, and he didn't know if the dizziness was due to his sickened state or his nerves. He wouldn't let that drag him down in any case and he stumbled over to his beloved.

There were a couple of cries and both he and the captain surged towards the cat with outstretched arms. Ant wanted to brush them off. He was alright, he didn't need any crutches.

He fell to the floor, his knees roughly scraping the wood. Perhaps there would be more cuts and bruises to add to his already impressive collection.

"Velvet," he repeated, focusing his whole gaze on his beloved's magnificent eyes. He blindly groped for his hands and held them tightly against his chest. "Will you marry me?"

"You already asked me that, remember?" Velvet replied, visibly amused. The band on his finger was still there, shining and perfect.

But Antfrost was serious. "Marry me," he reiterated, whiskers twitching and pulling his muzzle up into a smile. "Today, or tomorrow, as soon as we can. Please."

He couldn't live without Velvet. He couldn't exist without him, and the only way he could keep breathing was with him. He would never leave him ever again, and the only way his fuzzy mind could think of pleading with him was popping the question once again.

Velvet finally crouched down to his height, his hands still entrapped in his own. "Did you think I'd ever say no?"

Antfrost would have been lying if he denied it. The thought had crossed his mind more times than he could count and, even worse, he had begun to wonder if Velvet had drifted away in his absence. Saying "no" would have been painful enough, but saying "yes" and leaving afterwards would have torn his heart and soul to shreds.

"I... don't know anymore."

His head was still spinning, from everything. Even with the Egg gone, getting his head to stop thumping day and night would be a challenge.

"Then let me refresh your memory."

Still hazy and confused, Antfrost barely registered the hard, eager kiss that pressed against his lips but when he did, he fell into it, tumbling into a spiral of sweet delights

and candyfloss clouds. He hadn't been kissed for years, and he had forgotten what it felt like.

The gentle lulling melodies that filled his ears, the weightlessness of his body, the heaviness of his eyelids, and the warmth that trickled through him.

His angel was kissing him again, finally, and he was allowed to taste the little slice of heaven he was granted. After years of hell, it was wonderful.

"Yes," Velvet whispered once he pulled back, in a hushed reply to his previous questions. "Yes, I'd marry you now, tomorrow, the day after that, right up until the moment our world ends."

"I still think you should wait until he's fully healed," Puffy suddenly butted in, her hand pressing against Ant's forehead.

The cat let out a low but lighthearted growl, only mildly annoyed by the captain's interruption. He couldn't stay mad at her for long though, not while her face was alight with the same joy that graced his own. A single, smiling glance his way showed that she was happy for them.

"Maybe," Velvet echoed, deep in thought. From the way he stroked Ant's cheek, the cat somehow knew that he was considering nothing of the sort.

"Maybe," the cat murmured back, closing his eyes and purring. He too was ridiculously impatient, and completely disregarded Puffy's advice.

They were also both apparently awful at hiding it.

Puffy let out a sigh and a laugh, then handed something to Velvet. "Change the bandages when you lovebirds start to calm down," she instructed.

"Don't you need them for Sam?"

Sam?

Antfrost's ears perked up.

Sam was here too?

But... Sam was dead. How could he be here? Was Puffy going insane with grief?

"He's alright," Puffy continued. "The scratches are healing well."

Scratches?

Shakily, Ant stretched out his paw and flexed his claws. He hadn't realized that they were just as exhausted and stiff as the rest of his body. He swallowed hard, and tried to find his voice.

"Ant, Sam's alright," Velvet said.

Sam was alive.

"Is he okay?" he couldn't help but check, and then, with a growing terror, "Did I hurt him?"

A brief silence fell over the room, and the cat's fears were only confirmed. He had hurt Sam. He had left him to die, and then he had injured him. He didn't know why, he didn't know how badly, but he had hurt him.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Puffy said, kneeling down beside him. "He's fine, just a little sore."

Antfrost had a feeling that every word was sugar coated, but he couldn't prove it. He didn't want to prove it.

Velvet's body curled around him again. "It wasn't your fault."

It most definitely was.

"He's alright, Ant," Puffy reiterated, "really. He forgives you, I forgive you, and no one is angry at you."

Again, Antfrost had his doubts, but he swallowed them down along with the wish to rip out his own claws.

"I..."

He couldn't say anything else. His throat started to rub itself raw again.

"Rest," Puffy ordered, then stood up herself. "I'll check on you both later, but shout if you need anything."

Once the captain had left them alone again, Antfrost turned Velvet's head towards him and kissed him again, this time sloppy, needy, and far dirtier than what he would have been comfortable doing in front of others.

"What a welcome," his partner gasped, disheveled and breathing heavily.

Antfrost lay one more peck on his jaw, and rested his head on his shoulder, "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

Antfrost had questions, and Velvet had the answers he needed. He didn't want to ruin what they had though, and so he stayed quiet.

Velvet helped him up and back to the bed, letting him sit down comfortably before he unwound the bandages around his chest. Ant knew that he should have taken the opportunity to assess his injury, but he had eyes for nothing else other than his beloved, still drifting so gently across his chest with his nimble baker fingers. He worked the new roll of bandages like an icing bag, curling the soft white strands around him as if he was decorating a cake; with all the care in the world.

Ant has missed that. He missed cooking with Velvet, he missed their bakery, he missed their old home.

"Has it changed at all?"

Velvet finished tying the bandages and helped the cat down. As he tucked him in under the warm quilts and blankets, he smiled. "Do you have the time to just sit and listen?"

For Velvet, anything. Antfrost nodded eagerly, then sunk back down into his bed as Velvet began to talk, lying down over the covers as he did.

It was paradise, and he could finally share it with an angel again. His angel, Velvet.

Velvet and Antfrost.

Antfrost and Velvet.

Together once again, and never to be broken apart. Antfrost would rather rip himself from his grave rather than give up a life with his beloved again.

He was staying and going wherever Velvet went, and that was his final promise and thought before he fell asleep again.

"Where have you been?" asked Sam in a deep, gravelly tone as Puffy came back downstairs.

"Bad case of morning voice, huh?" she noted with a grin, walking towards him.

He sat up, slinging one arm over the back of the armchair. The morning sun kissed his skin with a bright, glimmering luster, and the scratch marks down his torso were definitely looking a lot better. Half-lidded eyes gazed up at her with all the love in the world, and something he could only describe as pure and utter devotion.

He lifted the corner of the blanket out of her way and she curled back up on his lap.

He sighed. "Good morning, my darling."

It sounded truer to her ears than her own name.

"Good morning, my love..."

They was sweeter on her tongue than any other words had ever been.

The rest of that night had been spent in a beautiful, loving warmth, with the two of them simply holding one another and talking in hushed voices. Puffy had no idea who out of the two of them had dozed off first. They were both exhausted and spent, but happy, and it had been so long since the captain had been granted the chance to wake up next to someone she loved.

Even now morning had broken with a painted sky and a gentle snowfall, she was just about ready to succumb back into sweet bliss of both Sam's arms and the gentle lulling of sleep.

Everything was warm, and she felt safe – safe enough to let her mind wander back to Antfrost's proposal. Safe enough to flit her eyes up to Sam's face, and safe enough to dare to fantasize, even for just a moment.

It was silly to even imagine the prospect after only a few hours wrapped in a romance with him. Even if he could somehow read her mind and agree with her, it was far, far too soon anyway. Sam was smart and thoughtful, as well as logical and rational.

And yet...

Well...

Lives could be short, and Puffy had been constantly reminded to make the most of all of them.

"Sorry about the voice," he yawned, his tone still deep. He nuzzled her cheek.

"Don't be, I like it," Puffy replied, leaning in closer.

He immediately lifted a gentle hand to her jaw and captured her in another kiss, sleepier and softer than all those from the night before.

Yes, she could definitely see a future for them. She only hoped that Fate would see eye to eye with her on it, for once.

She checked the wound on his arm. Red spots had started to seep out from beneath the bandages, but they were few and far between. With moderate care and maybe a Healing potion to speed things along, the scratches would scar in a couple of days or so. It could have been much worse. Nevertheless, changing the bandages was still a good idea.

Sam tried to take the roll from her as soon as she grabbed it from the floor. "I can handle it, you've already done so much for me—"

"Oh no you don't, we're not going through this again. Let me take care of you, you're exhausted."

"And so are you."

He was right, but Puffy wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of a victory. Not under her own roof.

She didn't say anything, instead relying on the charms of her blue eyes he had spent all night staring into and complimenting profusely. She had quickly learned that a sweet look was all it took to wrap him around her finger.

Sam seemed completely entranced at first, hypnotized beyond reason. Then, he opened and closed his mouth a few times, clearly trying to push something out, before eventually sighing and dutifully twisting his body so she could reach his arm.

With a smug grin, she held his wrist firmly and began to unwind the bandages. "There, that wasn't so hard, was it?" she cooed, teasing.

Puffy noted how he averted his gaze, a blush rising in his cheeks. The back of his free hand covered his mouth, and he was staring intently off into the distance. An embarrassed, blushing mess – it was a sight to behold.

"Don't get too comfortable with that," he mumbled against his knuckles, an audible rumble rising in his throat.

"With what? Watching you crumble?"

"No, that look. I might just end up selling you my soul one day."

"Suits me fine." She finished bandaging his wound, then stood up and went to clear her supplies away. "I'm going out for a bit."

"Where to?"

"Kinoko Kingdom. I'm going to check on Sapnap."

Sam pushed himself out of his seat. "I'm coming too."

"Not like that you're not."

"Injured or half-naked?"

"Both."

"Well, both can be fixed just as easily."

She gently pushed him back down again, surprised when she was met with very little resistance. "You need to rest."

"So do you."

"Less than you do."

"I doubt that."

"Fine, I promise I'll come back soon, and we'll *both* sleep, alright?" Just as he was about to protest again, she pressed a finger to his lips. "I don't want to hear another word about it."

Sam kissed the back of her hand and sighed. "I'm worried about you. What if the Egg is still there, or even Dream?"

Dream was definitely not a threat she had heard about in a long time. If he had been smart enough, he would have run off, never to return, and Puffy knew he was smart. His greatest advantage over them all was the fear that he was still there, exhausting and teasing the search patrols and making the demand for locks higher than they had ever been before. He was still torturing them from afar, but as long as he wasn't anywhere close to them anymore, she spared no thought for the danger.

"I'll be fine," she assured Sam, stroking a hand through his hair.

His resolves seemed to waver, and he eventually leaned back. "Alright," he gave in. Tensely, he shifted again to try and get comfortable.

Puffy went to change, finally able to rid herself of the last awful memory of the night: the dress. No matter what Sam said or what she thought, it was horrid of her to have worn it for so long. She slipped on a shirt, fastened a dark cloak around her shoulders and shoved her trusty tricorne on top of her head before making her way back to Sam.

She gave him an update on Antfrost. The smile that broke through his features was wide and relieved, and he thanked her profusely with another avalanche of affection.

He held her hand right up until she backed towards the door, the tips of his fingers softly brushing her palm. A warm and fuzzy sensation ran all throughout her body. The cold no longer fazed her when she stepped outside, and she instead relished the sunlight.

As she journeyed to Kinoko, she was surprised to say the least. Everything seemed to be completely normal, from the people that greeted her on the Prime Path to the landscape itself. Devoid of red vines and growths, it was quiet and bright. The crimson winter had finally ceased, and a new kind of spring had come to the land.

Perhaps the only remarkable thing she saw was a small, solemn procession laden with flowers that snaked over the Prime Path. At first, she thought it was for the funeral of the few fallen casualties of the Red Banquet battle. However, there wasn't a single coffin in sight, so that theory was quickly shot down.

No coffins, but flowers and candles, and a few small homemade flags that flapped in the wind. They weren't just any flags either, and Captain Puffy faltered.

She racked her brains and checked the date. It hit her soon after.

November 16th.

Already?

Tommy's own funeral, sometime near the beginning of March, felt like yesterday. Instead, nine whole months had passed, crammed with a staggering amount of events. So short, yet so long.

Puffy let the memorial procession pass by, bowing her head respectfully. She then stood and watched from afar as they continued their winding road towards the crater where L'Manberg once stood. She made a note to go pay her respects as well on her way back to Snowchester.

November 16th seemed to have blown everything out of the water that day, and not a single tendril or mask seemed to remain of the Egg or its accompanying masquerade. It was as if they had never existed in the first place.

It was only when she came to the Community House that the last few dregs of the past evening made their appearance.

Exhausted patrols from the Greater SMP, Las Nevadas and the Temple trudged in their separate directions, headed by their respective leaders. She tried to catch Foolish's attention, but he was deeply preoccupied and led his troops towards the Nether portal without a second look. His frown, along with the empty hands and shackles of all the others told her that last night's arrests proved to be fruitless.

She continued on towards Kinoko Kingdom, appreciating the lush and vibrant roads leading to the mushroom valley.

She had heard many things about it – streets piled high with silks, giant mushrooms replacing trees and the waters rich with sacred golden fish – but it was the first time she would actually see any of it for herself.

As the road tilted, dipping down into a dark oak forest, she could just see the golden tops of the pagodas glint in the late morning sun. They looked shiny and new like a

polished treasure trove and she momentarily abandoned her mission at hand to veer off to a viewpoint and take it all in.

The kingdom looked far more like a magical city than a fully functioning nation. Only the pagodas reached the tops of the trees and the mushrooms, successfully hiding the rest of the streets and homes from view. A fantastic little civilization hidden in the forest and buried beneath legends and myths.

It was both quaint and downright magnificent at the same time, a place where simplicity and luxury mixed beautifully. Kinoko Kingdom was perhaps not the biggest jewel encrusted onto the SMP's crown, nor the most industrialized, richest or battle-worthy, but it was undoubtedly the most splendid.

The panoramic viewpoint she had found was just off the cobbled road, against a line of dark oak trees. The path continued to wind down into the valley, while the forest stretched out onto a plateau. The trees became scarce until they gave away completely to a crystal clear, guzzling lagoon fed by a small spring trickling down from the rocks. A large, finely chiseled dragon sculpture took pride of place near the edge, looking out over the mushroom kingdom below with a wise, piercing glare.

Just between the statue and the pool of water sat a little bench made from white marble, veined with light grey imperfections. On it sat two figures Puffy recognized soon enough.

One was the person she was looking for, but the other's presence stopped her from running over to him.

Instead, she continued to linger near the edge of the forest, just barely concealed by the trees' shadows. She listened in, knowing full well that it wasn't her place to interrupt.

At least not yet.

"Can you hear the birds?"

Sapnap raised his head up to the sky. The wind whistled, and a few dark shapes circled high overhead. "No, not really."

He looked down again. Karl's head was turned to the nearby rock faces. "Some swallow eggs just hatched, and the babies are already becoming a handful."

He smiled with the tenderness of a mother hen, and turned back to the fireborn. The blindfold was tied securely over his eyes. He had refused to let anyone take it off, except to clean and spread some ointment over his burns.

Sapnap could never erase the vivid image of Karl's eyes, wide and blank. Unseeing, almost dead. All because of him.

"That's... nice, Karl," he replied.

When Kinoko's doctors had been tending to Karl, Sapnap had ducked out into the open air and found the nearest water trough. There, he tore off his gloves and thrust his hands under the surface. The water had immediately latched at his skin and started leeching off his fire, bubbling and boiling over the edge. The pain had been unbearable. He wanted it to stop. He wanted to douse his body, forever.

His fire, his only source of comfort and power, had hurt the person he loved most. He had never been so eager to banish it, even if he had to suffer to do so. No agony could have ever been greater than seeing Karl's mutilation.

He had been forcefully yanked out by George when his screams had finally reached their peak. His hands and forearms had to be tightly bandaged, concealing the cracked ashen crust their watery submersion had made. They would heal in a day or two, the healers had said.

Sapnap fiddled with the loose end of one of his bandages that peeped over the top of his glove. He rolled it between his fingers, and turned his attention to the clear blue pool in front of them. He could jump in right now, and no one would be able to stop him.

It would fix so many problems.

"I can hear you too."

Sapnap's breath hitched. "I'm right next to you."

Karl's hand fumbled until he found his, and held on tightly. His simple touch was warmer than any bonfire could ever be. "I can hear you crackling," he said, "you're nervous."

"It's just... strange to come back here after so long, after what I've done," Sapnap admitted. Then, he placed his other hand on Karl's. "It's strange to be with you."

The lower half of Karl's face brightened into a smile. "I'm surprised you came back at all. I thought you were "living your best life without Kinoko"."

The awful memories of their argument at the Red Banquet started to come back to him. There was no excuse for the fact that he had said some hurtful things, and maybe – if he had just done one thing differently – things could have turned out better. Karl wouldn't have been caught in his flaming crossfire. *Karl would have been okay.*

"After everything I've done," the fireborn muttered, "how could you ever love me?"

Karl's hand slipped from his grasp, and Sapnap screwed his eyes shut. Mistakes, that was all he could do, all he could make, even in something as simple as a question.

"Well, you burned down Kinoko," began Karl, and Sapnap winced, preparing himself for a long list of his crimes.

It stopped there, and he was surprised. "And?"

"And what?"

"There's more."

"Is there?" Karl was still smiling.

"What about supposedly killing those animals? Siding with Technoblade? Crashing what was supposed to be a peaceful evening? Threatening you, even *blinding you?!'*"

There, he had said it, and he broke down. Sapnap pressed his head into his hands and cried his burning tears. The water had never looked more inviting. He almost gave in to his impulse to jump.

The only thin thread, the twine holding him steady, was Karl's voice.

"You are innocent when it comes to the animals," he told him. "We found the culprit who tried to frame you in order to get a seat within the Council. You've been pardoned and acquitted."

Sapnap looked up, stunned. He had been... forgiven?

"The criminal has been dealt with," Karl continued. "What else is there to be angry about? Technoblade took you in and kept you safe, and we all know what the true intentions of that party really were. You saved us all, you and everyone else. As for

burning down Kinoko, that was an overreaction, I have to admit. Even so, it was our fault, my fault."

Pardoned, forgiven, acquitted. Tears of frustration soon turned to tears of joy. And yet...

"I hurt you," Sapnap whispered hoarsely. "You're blind because of me."

"Well, no, actually." The fireborn still couldn't understand how calm Karl was being, as well as his soft smile that never wavered. "I played the hero and wasn't careful, there's nothing more to it."

Sapnap was aghast and horrified that Karl could ever blame himself for it all. "It was my fire! If I hadn't set it off—"

"—people would have died, and the SMP would have descended into complete madness. Whatever happened last night was meant to be, I'm sure of it."

More than sure, he sounded absolutely certain, as if the future had been laid out in front of him the whole time. His optimism was unrivalled, and Sapnap had stopped trying to understand it a long time ago.

"I may be blind, but I can hear more, and feel more."

Karl's head turned to the fireborn, and his delicate undid the blindfold. He let the sky blue material drop and drift into the water below, skimming the surface like a silk fairy. Then, he lifted his hands up to Sapnap's face and began to feel him. He trailed his fingers over his jawline, his eyebrows and eyelids, his nose bridge, the imperfections and raised scar tissues.

The fireborn could only stare into his misty eyes, their deathly glare starting to morph into the shine of two beautiful perles.

Karl's thumb swiped over his bottom lip and he couldn't hold himself back any longer. He took his leap of faith, but not into the pool.

After holding onto his grudges and lovesickness for so long, freezing in the tundra and pining over what ifs and if onlys, sinking back into Karl's embrace was a pure, sweet blessing.

Nothing else mattered to him except him, his lover, his partner. He never wanted to leave him again.

"I'll be your eyes," Sarnap murmured against his lips.

Karl grinned again, wide and childish. "I want you to walk with me and describe everything, I want to see it all with you."

"When summertime comes around, I'll take you to the cherry groves. I'll describe how the nymphs dance with the flowers. Then we can make sherry together, just how we used to."

"With too much sugar?"

"Of course, how else?"

Karl let out a breathless giggle. "We can play games with George, colour games just to annoy him. Even blind, I'm certain I could beat him."

"I'll help you cheat," Sarnap agreed, and they both fell about laughing. Then, he turned more serious. "I'll guide you through your darkness, I'll keep you safe, I'll do anything and everything for you for as long as my lives still beat."

"I don't want to imprison you with me," Karl said.

"You're not my prison. You're my key, my freedom."

"Even so, even just a single lifetime full of love would be enough. That's all I ask of you, if you'll have me back."

For the first time that day, there was a tremble in Karl's tone. The guilt that always came with asking a favour was only more apparent, and it hurt Sarnap more than he could possibly describe.

The mere implication that Karl didn't think he deserved him, thought he had to beg for the love Sarnap had always given, the fact that he thought he needed to apologize to him – there was still a trench between them and although it was being filled by a slow but steady landslide of confessions and forgiveness, it was apparent.

"I was never fit to rule Kinoko in the first place, and I never will be. I've always been blind to everything that was important, like you, and I don't think that'll ever change."

"That's exactly why you are fit to rule," Sarnap replied. "You put the wellbeing of your nation before your own."

"I put them all before you."

"And maybe that was for the best."

Sapnap understood. He didn't necessarily forgive the way it was done or how they treated him, but he understood now. Karl was selfless, and it was one of his great qualities. It was a quality Sapnap rarely had himself.

"I can hear footsteps. I think someone's here."

Sapnap looked up and sure enough, saw a cloaked figure emerge from the treeline across the lagoon. He recognized her immediately, and smiled.

"Hey, Puffy!"

He began to wonder just how much of the conversation she had heard, and couldn't help but heat up in embarrassment.

Her knowing smile spoke volumes, and she bowed before them both. "I just wanted to see if you were alright."

"By alright, I'm assuming you mean not hung, drawn and quartered."

She let out a nervous laugh. "Basically."

"You don't need to worry about that anymore," Karl piped up, proudly interlacing his and Sapnap's fingers together. "He's a hero, you all are, and will all be treated as such."

The captain continued to watch them, her previous, pleasantly surprised expression softening into one of recognition. "Then my work here is done," she said, bidding them adieu. "I have someone waiting for me too."

And with that, she turned on her heels and started to walk back towards the Greater SMP. Sapnap had questions – questions he sort of already knew the answer to – but he stayed put on the bench with Karl. Something told him he wouldn't be budging for a while, and he was alright with that.

He lifted his head up and focused on the small, beady emerald eye of the dragon statue, then followed its gaze as it stared out across the valley.

The dark oak and cherry blossom trees, the giant mushrooms, the ridiculously tall pagodas and the gentle, rocky chain surrounding them. It was all so familiar, and yet Sarnap felt like he was seeing them for the first time.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Karl asked candidly, turning his face up to the air. He sighed and leaned on the fireborn's shoulder.

Beautiful beyond words, beyond description – that wouldn't do. Sarnap had to be able to describe it somehow. He'd learn in time, now he had plenty of it with Karl again. No worries, no cares, no rushes.

"It's magnificent," he agreed.

"It's our home," Karl hummed, pressing himself against his side.

Sarnap finally cracked a relieved smile, warm, gentle flames dancing pleasantly throughout his body. "It's our home."

He was home.

The deadliest criminal the lands had ever known escaping from the most secure prison in the world, and now an entire nation's worth of maddened cultists on the run.

It was astounding how the mainlands were absolutely incapable of keeping their own problems in hand.

The desert lands had barely been shaken by any of the others' issues, and lived a far more peaceful existence than everyone else. But Foolish always strived for good diplomacy, and above all, he knew what friendship was. So when Eret and Quackity asked for his help with arresting the Eggpire, he immediately called his soldiers together and led them to the SMP.

After seeing the state of the people he crossed, he had never been more relieved to have declined a party invitation.

As for the Eggpire, they had all disappeared without a trace, without a single clue to go off. Like Dream, they had evaded capture even despite all the troops sent to apprehend them. It was ridiculous.

Ridiculously dangerous, of course, and it had whipped up both Eret and Quackity into a frenzy. Foolish was a lot calmer, knowing that his previous display of power had been more than enough to deter the Eggpire from confronting his realm.

But again, friendship was something he valued, and so he turned to the universe.

Gods were not all powerful as some made them out to be: even their powers and knowledge had their limits. Foolish may have been the God of the Undying, the Protector of the Sands, the Guardian of the Totems, but that was it. He didn't have the knowledge so many claimed he had.

He didn't ask for favours often, and he prayed that just this one time, the universe would grant him an answer.

It didn't, instead bursting into a golden shower of light and sun rays. It was purposely avoiding his question. Foolish just hoped that it had a good reason to. The universe always worked itself out one way or another – maybe he just had to be patient and let it happen.

Something nipped at Foolish's golden ear, and he gently shooed it away. Another one bit his other earlobe. One dove down to his shoulder, another one to his throat. Again, the god only brushed them off. They came back a lot more aggressive, and forced him to a stop.

"I don't know what game it is you're trying to play," he gently scolded the air and the faint floating creatures that inhabited it, "but you could at least wait until we get back to the Temple."

They were the ones with no totems anymore, their own broken or simply non-existent, and had decided to seek shelter beside their god. They were playful, and occasionally obnoxious when a pestering mood took them, but they ended up knowing more than many – sometimes, even more than Foolish himself did.

A moment later, the biting resumed, quicker and sharper than ever before. Foolish was just about to scold them again, when he finally took note of the urgency in their nips.

Instead, he stopped again and listened carefully to what the spirits had to say. He waited, he listened, and he faltered. His accompanying troop seemed to notice, and also came to a standstill.

"My Lord," a captain tentatively called out, "is everything alright?"

No, nothing was if what the spirits had told him turned out to be true. There was only one way to truly make sure.

"The Temple," he ordered, spurring his warriors on, the usual booming nature of his voice now bordering on strained.

All throughout the journey, the spirits still wouldn't leave him alone, continuing to snap at his skin, urging him to go faster, to be far more worried than he let slip.

Foolish still knew he had to keep his cool, at least until he was out of sight of everyone else.

Seeing a leader crumble was bad enough, but see a god do the same? There would be no hope left for anyone.

He turned to the universe again once he set foot onto the piping hot sands of his beloved desert. The sky was wide and blue, and the sun's rays burned his eyes. A lone osprey screeched overhead, arching over Foolish's head with the grace of a summer's breeze and soaring off towards the pyramid.

The pyramid.

Foolish had always been satisfied with the few, quaint powers the universe had bestowed upon him, but he had never wanted the ability to teleport more than he did then. Instead, his thundering feet had to be enough, beating the sand down into submission in his wake.

The moment he arrived at the gargantuan gates of the Temple of the Undying, the spirits took the lead. He grabbed a nearby torch and dashed off across the courtyard. The sphinx statue watched over the scene with its passive gaze and knowing smile – if only it could talk.

As Foolish came closer and closer to the pyramid's secret entrance, he started to pick out the first signs of some sort of struggle. Specks of blood, indents left by sharp blades carved into the sandstone floor and bricks, and finally the bodies of a few guards and devout priests lying lifelessly in the cold sleep of death, dried blood clotting the gaping slits on their necks.

There was no point in fetching his staff to open the passage: the hidden door had been hacked apart by pickaxes, forming a crumbling, darkened entrance.

A tomb robbery, if Foolish had ever seen one. And yet, there were no riches or offerings to steal inside his pyramid, except for—

No.

"No," he breathed, leaping headfirst into the hole.

The steps were too wet and slippery, further proof that the break-in had taken place many, many hours ago, allowing the humidity of the cold desert night to seep in and stain the stairs. Foolish continued to run, slipping and sliding, and hitting his head on the ceiling that seemed to be getting lower by the minute.

He soon realized that the building wasn't getting smaller, but that he was growing bigger. His panicked state took full control of his powers, making them go haywire. High, high above ground, he could hear the rumble of a storm brewing that shook the very foundations of his sacred temple.

Finally, he pushed himself out of the threshold at the bottom, and tripped on the shadows. The torch went flying out of his hand and extinguished on impact with the floor.

Foolish watched and waited for the green stars to greet him, to let him know that they were still there and everything was alright, that everything was there.

He waited.

Nothing.

He blindly groped the floor for the torch and lit it again before shining it around his surroundings.

Nothing.

A crack of lightning broke the hidden storm clouds high in the sky, sending a trembling whip down into the bowels of the earth. The spirits began to wail and screech in grief-stricken agony.

Only Foolish remained silent.

Crumbling leaders brought about man-made chaos, and a broken god could unleash the anger of the universe and the seven deadly plagues in the blink of an eye. It took all his strength to stop himself from doing so and catching the undeserving in his crossfire.

But the deserving, oh, he would take great, delectable pleasure in tearing them apart. His anger was somehow overpowered by the holes slowly growing inside him.

He dropped to his knees, gaping up at the walls bordered by endless darkness. The *empty* walls. Every single last totem – no matter if they were vacant or occupied – was gone. The only things he had sworn to protect, the reason for his entire, divine existence, were *gone*.

All that remained were a couple of small black spiders scuttling across the sandy floor and a god desperately trying to harness the brewing, destructive storm the theft had unleashed across the land.

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Awakening

Purpled woke up suddenly.

It wasn't unusual; being a bounty hunter meant that not only were his sleeping schedules a mess but that his instincts, even unconscious, were sharp. Alert, he snapped his eyes open and began to assess his surroundings.

A dim light was the first thing he saw, swinging over where he lay. A dancing flame locked in an iron and glass prison cast trembling shadows on the ceiling. It was strangely entrancing to his blinded eyes.

Next, he turned his attention to his body. Heavy, stiff, made of rock; moving was hard. He must have been asleep for a while. He couldn't remember the last time he had done so. He couldn't remember... much, in fact.

Finally, he listened carefully to the sounds around him, trying to pick out any telling details, or potentially any dangers.

"Fucking hell, they gave me a kid. That's just fantastic."

He froze. The light continued to swing. The shadows continued to dance.

He blinked and tried to regain his senses. He didn't think he was dreaming, but then how...?

With immense difficulty, he managed to lever himself up into something that resembled a sitting position. From his new angle, the light was only brighter. He flinched and narrowed his eyes, glowing spots striking at his vision.

He could now see a bit more of the world around him. His bed was a little harder and scratchier than he first thought it was, bits of straw stabbing into his hands and pricking him well and truly awake, and the walls were far greyer and more sculpted than he expected them to be, like the walls of an ornate palace hallway.

A shadow painted the wall opposite him, and he forced his eyes to focus in. It was the silhouette of a man, propped up against the wall much like Purpled was. His leg was brought up under him and he was slouching, eerily relaxed. It wouldn't have been an unusual sight if it wasn't for the recognizable moustache and mutton chops, and most notably, the pair of large, curled horns that adorned either side of his head.

"Christ, you look like you've seen a ghost," Schlatt laughed. His chuckle was raspy and dark, just as it had always been. The bounty hunter never thought that he'd hear it again.

Purpled's eyes widened, and with a new burst of energy scrambled backwards. The hard, cold wall met the back of his head, sending a frozen jolt of electricity that shocked his entire being awake. He was awake, he had to be, all the signs pointed to it, and yet...

"You're dead," he managed to stutter out, his hand flying to his chest and urging his breath to calm down.

Schlatt shrugged. "I was," he agreed, and took a swig of the glass next to him. He made a face and coughed. "Ain't even got the good stuff here..."

"How... how are you here?"

Where even was "here"? Where the heck were they both? Nothing about it looked familiar, nothing at all.

Purpled knew the SMP like the back of his hand. He knew every crevice, every pebble, every twig and every tree. His job demanded it. So now he was thrust into a dark place he didn't know anything about, he began to panic. Panic was a form of weakness though, and he couldn't show that. He didn't want to show that. He couldn't afford to.

"At this point, I've been to hell and back again," replied the ram. "I don't ask questions anymore."

But Purpled had questions, a lot of them. He needed answers, he needed explanations – the most important being about where he was.

Even as time dragged on, nothing had changed, in his memories or in his surroundings. He didn't know where he was. *He didn't know where he was.*

"If you start crying, I'll fucking deck you."

Purpled wasn't crying. He never cried. Schlatt had got that wrong. His breathing was quick and uneven, and he curled in on himself. It was the best method of defense in case of an unexpected attack, making his weak spots harder to reach. He was being strategic. He buried his head in his knees, staring down into the dark cavity of his own making.

What did he know?

He could start from there.

He had woken up in a rough, straw bed on the floor. The world around him was made of carved stone; he was in a building of some sort. A dungeon? His body was heavy with the weight of a thousand battles, and yet he had no recollection of any of them. He had no memory of recent events, if there were any. And President Schlatt, the tyrant who had ruled over L'Manberg's darkest era, was trying to chat him up in the opposite bunk – Schlatt, who was supposed to be very much *dead*.

Footsteps came towards him, along with a couple of voices. Purpled didn't move, but he listened carefully.

"The next ten should wake up in about five minutes."

"That gives you five minutes to rest, then."

"Absolutely not. Revolution waits for no man, remember?"

There was a chuckle. "Glad to see that I still left some memorable marks. You need to rest, you're exhausted."

"It's easier now we've got the totems."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't drain you anyway."

"It takes longer to." A brief silence fell, followed by a sigh. "I'll do fifteen more, then I'll stop for today."

"Five."

"Ten, then. What's done today doesn't have to be done tomorrow."

"Dream, we've got all the time in the world."

"That's where you're wrong, Wilbur. The Egg is gone now, and they'll only grow stronger without it."

Dream. Wilbur.

It was a nightmare. Purpled was stuck in a nightmare. He stayed frozen in his little, curled up ball of limbs, even as a hand roughly nudged his arm.

"Hey kid, you good?"

"Leave him, Dream. He's having an episode." Schlatt's voice added itself to the nightmarish roster of villains. "Good to see you both."

"Looking good, Schlatt," Wilbur hummed.

"As always, Soot, as always."

"A thank you wouldn't go amiss. You're here because of us."

"Eh, keep trying. You might pull it out eventually."

"I thought Punz's own brother would be a little tougher," Dream sighed, his warm breath right next to Purpled's ear and heavy with contempt, perhaps even disappointment.

The bounty hunter bristled, but still stayed put.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Schlatt's right. Leave him, Dream, he's probably just tired."

Dream replied with a doubtful hum, and levered himself back to his feet. He brushed Purpled's shoulder as he did, and the hunter was shocked at how frail he seemed to be, shaking like a leaf and his legendary swordsman's grip lighter than a fairy's touch.

He made no comment for fear of being slaughtered – in fact, even a single wrong look could have signed his death warrant. Purpled wasn't scared of anything, except of his brother's richest friend and ally, Dream.

Wait.

If Dream was here, then surely—

Was he in Pandora's Vault? Dream was locked up in the prison, there was no way he could have gotten out. Sam had said it was secure, and everyone trusted the Warden's word. Even Purpled did.

A nightmare. That's what it was, nothing but a nightmare. The footsteps had faded into the distance, and he felt safe enough to look up again. Purpled raised his gaze.

Schlatt was still staring him down with a cocked eyebrow and a smirk.

"I remember you," he said. "Quite the bounty hunter, weren't you? I almost considered hiring you myself, but then I decided "what the heck, beating Wilbur on the battlefield would be much more fun!" I thought you were a tough guy, and yet here you are, cowering like a puppy. Some warrior you are."

Purpled was a warrior, more than Schlatt was in any way.

He would have retorted with a clever quip, if his state and mindset hadn't ripped all his courage and wit from him. "I'm not a puppy."

"You're crying like one."

Purpled buried his face in his knees again, not as a strategy but to hide from the twisted world he had been dropped into. He had only done so once before, when he was a toddler. His brother had retaliated immediately by scolding him.

"Soldiers don't hide, Grayson. They fight."

Not if they were feeling helpless enough. Being a bounty hunter meant nothing when vulnerability hit him like an anvil. It was a meaningless job title, not a shield or a sword.

He was just Purpled. He was just Grayson.

"Chin up," Schlatt sighed, "you're alive now."

Purpled looked up suddenly. "What do you mean? I've... always been alive?"

He had never died in the first place. He couldn't have died. He was Purpled, the most competent bounty hunter the realms had ever known. Heck, even the king of the Greater SMP had sought out his services! He had lost a life or two, but not all three. Never all three.

He had never died.

"Hate to break it to you, but you ain't here talking to me if you didn't."

Doubt, slowly but surely, was creeping in. Purpled looked down at himself. He looked fine – his clothes were a little dirty, dusted with rock-like residue, but there was no blood. He trailed his eyes down, until they landed on his boots.

They were heavy ones he had specially made: thick leather that could withstand the elements, steel capped toes and soles studded with netherite nails.

They were his boots, but he wasn't looking at them. He was staring at the truth that lay within them.

Shaky fingers began to unlace one of them and slid it off his foot. Then, they moved to the sock that they rolled down hesitantly. He didn't have to do any of it, he could drop everything and live with the truth he made up himself.

Before he could back down, he brought his bare foot into his lap. He stopped, and stared.

Three lives, three broken.

Three.

And a fourth, shiny and new, beating with a new life.

But three gone, broken, dead.

If he wasn't being watched intently by an ex-dictator, he would have passed out then and there. Instead, with a tight-lipped expression and a cold glare, he rolled his sock back up and put on his boot again.

"Believe me now?"

"How— how did I die?"

Schlatt rolled his eyes. "How am I supposed to know?"

Purpled stood up, his frozen glare trained on the ram. He disgusted him. "How did I die?" he repeated.

If Schlatt decided he wanted to be the all-knowing deity of his afterlife, then fine – Purpled would play the game. He'd play it until the ram buckled.

He took a few, weightless steps forward. He almost collapsed, but his anger kept him upright. "How did I die?"

"Easy there, easy!" Schlatt's relaxed posture tensed up, and he scrambled to press his back against the wall. He held up his hands in a defensive motion.

Such cowardice had never once swayed Purpled's morals, and that wasn't about to change then either.

He lunged forwards and gripped him by the collar of his shirt, yanking his pathetic, pale frame towards him. "*How the fuck did I die, Schlatt?!*"

"How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

Supposed to know, don't know. He didn't know. Purpled didn't know.

I don't know.

With that horrifying realization, he backed off. He dropped Schlatt and stumbled backwards, the weight of his bones, blood and flesh finally pinning him down to reality – at least, the reality he was trapped in.

The one with escaped monsters, revived villains and where death seemed to be nothing but a repairable hindrance.

He wanted to be dragged through the floor, down into whatever grave he had been ripped from.

No, he didn't want to go back there. He had never been there in the first place.

He didn't die, he didn't die—

He ran. He didn't know where to. The hallway was long, longer than it should have been. Similar beds to his down lined the walls, always the same formation. They were occupied by people he didn't know, and flashes of ones that he did but that he had sworn that he had disposed of for good.

As he ran, he tried to think, to rake through the scattered leaves of his mind to find anything that could prove or disprove what he had seen.

Three, now four.

One, two, three, broken.

One, two, three and four.

Fourth intact.

Another life, three lost to gain it.

How? *How?*

He collided with something, hard, and almost fell backwards. A hand reached out to steady him, wrapping itself around his shoulder. It was a harsh grip, one of iron.

"Purpled, what's up?"

Purpled didn't answer, instead letting out a growl and violently banging his head against the obstacle, wanting it *to move out of the way already!* He felt memories and rational thoughts leave him with every impact.

He wanted – no, *needed* – to run wherever his legs would take him, the legs that felt broken and battered. Every bone in his body seemed to have crumbled into fragments and skittered around his whole body like shattered china. He didn't care. He still needed to run until someone answered his questions, or until he died for a fourth time.

Whichever would come first.

The hand on his shoulder snaked around his back and pulled him in close. Purpled couldn't move his head anymore, and he stopped. The world in front of his eyes was dark and made of scratchy woven yarn. It smelt faintly of gunpowder, and reeked with the stench of hidden caverns and bloody war.

It was the only truly familiar thing Purpled knew in wherever his death had brought him.

Long, bony fingers began to comb through his blond hair, soothing the tangles and matted clumps. The gentleness and technique felt rehearsed, or even experienced.

"Hey, calm down. It's alright, Purpled, it's alright. Just breathe."

There were many things that Purpled never thought he'd do in his lives, and getting comforted by Wilbur Soot himself was one of them. Getting well and truly comforted by anyone, in fact.

He was always told to be tough, to fight, to get over it. Being allowed to simply breathe was new, and so he did just that.

In and out, enveloped in the strangely comforting warmth of a madman who had set the world on fire. He shouldn't have felt safe, and yet he did.

In, and out.

In, and out.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Sharp And Strong

Purpled was alive – he knew that much.

Alive now, because he had been dead. He didn't know how long for, and he didn't know how. The only real clue he had was the shattered life on the sole of his foot.

A fall, perhaps, or an explosion. He recalled an earth-shattering rumble, and the dry crack of lightning that split the ground he stood on in two.

Things were still fuzzy to him, and those few, vague memories amounted to nothing.

He was still trying to come to terms with everything, lying down in his scratchy little bed on the floor. He stayed there for a while – again, he didn't know how long exactly. It felt like only a few minutes, but a few whispers between Wilbur and Schlatt when they thought he was sleeping told him it had been two weeks or so.

Two weeks. That was a long time.

Schlatt, unsurprisingly, didn't care much and had stopped talking to Purpled after a day of unresponsive silence.

Wilbur, on the other hand, seemed to be the complete opposite. He greeted Purpled every morning even if he said nothing in return, brought him food even if the hunter never ate any of it, and came back in the evening to say goodnight even if Purpled wasn't about to sleep anytime soon. Sometimes, he even sat down at his bedside and played his guitar, brightening the air with soft, supple melodies of his own creation spewing from his fingertips. He did so regularly, and diligently.

Part of Purpled wished that he'd stop. The kindness he was being shown was somewhat new and made him uncomfortable, left him feeling like an imposter in his own body, but that wasn't the half of it.

It was who that kindness was coming from.

Wilbur Soot; a power drunk leader, a pyromaniac, a madman, the son of the Angel of Death himself, and one of the biggest evils the SMP had painted with so few actual acts of villainy. There was nothing safe or calming about him, and yet Purpled was starting to feel safe and calm in his presence.

It was wrong. Every part of it was morbidly *wrong*.

And yet, Purpled was a bounty hunter – he went and cozied up to wherever the prize took him. A reward, kindness and beautiful music to pass the time, was right there, visiting tantalizingly often and dangling in front of him.

Purpled was weak and greedy enough to give in.

So he said "good morning" first one day, mouth tugging up into a discreet smirk when Wilbur was visibly taken aback. The element of surprise never failed.

"Good... morning, Purpled." A brief tremor of surprise and uncertainty sprinkled the man's greeting, followed by a light wooden tap against the stone floor as a bowl was set down in front of his face. "Are you up to eating something?"

The stew – venison, he guessed from the smell – was still bubbling pleasantly. Venison, deer. They were near a forest.

"No thank you." His stomach growled in protest. "Maybe later."

Wilbur didn't take the bowl back, and instead sat cross-legged on the floor next to him. Neither of them spoke.

"How are you feeling?" the man asked after a while.

Purpled thought for a moment, his fingers idly brushing the rim of the warm bowl. "Alive, I guess."

He liked the way the burning touches lingered on his fingers, before dissipating and fading into nothingness. Sharp stabs that grounded him. He needed that.

"That's good to hear."

Purpled rolled over onto his back with a muffled groan and stared up at the ceiling. The lantern above his head was still swinging, creaking as it did. It was threatening to fall and he should have asked about moving out from under it, but he didn't. He liked the danger of it.

He heard something being pushed towards him, and cast a glance to the side. The venison stew had inched forwards ever so slightly, still bubbling and popping.

"However," continued Wilbur, "it would be nice to keep you that way. You should eat."

Purpled wasn't hungry. "I'd rather not."

"Eat."

"You're not my brother."

"I know, but still. Eat. Just think of me as a concerned uncle, or friend, or even just as a nurse."

The hunter would rather not imagine Wilbur Soot as anything other than what he was and what he had been made out to be. It was easier to still keep his guard up that way, even when trying to weave some sort of polite acquaintanceship with him.

The reward, Purpled, just think of that.

He wanted to hear more music.

Half-heartedly, he sat up against the wall and took the bowl from the floor, holding it up to his lips. He took a single sip that slipped down his throat in a burning river. It tasted

bitter to his dry tongue and landed heavily in his empty stomach. He put the rest of the stew down again and wiped away a stray drop from the corner of his mouth.

"Good boy." Wilbur's hand landed on his knee and patted it like one would a well-behaved dog.

Purpled bristled and said nothing, instead adjusting his eyes to the surroundings he had never seen outside of blurry, half-lidded eyes and the dark of night.

As previously deduced, his bed was one of the many lined up on both sides of a long, stone corridor. Gothic arches were set at regular intervals, holding up the curved ceiling from which hung thick, matted clumps of age-old cobwebs, their arachnid owners long since departed. Occasionally, the stone walls were broken up by thin, arched windows mottled together with a mix of wrought iron and bright stained glass. A few of the panes were altogether missing and those who still remained were grimy and cracked. They still filtered in the sunlight, casting colourful stains over the floors and straw billets.

Even if he wasn't dead, the church-like ambiance definitely made it seem that he was about to be. The silence as well was almost absolute, even though most of the beds were occupied.

Schlatt's opposite him had been assigned a new owner – a decidedly short enderian with bright yellow eyes – and the ram himself was nowhere to be found. Looking around now, Purpled noted that most of the other faces he had run past and recognized or thought he had recognized were also gone.

"I still don't know why I'm here," he said, turning back to Wilbur. "No one has told me anything."

The man's brow furrowed and he took a moment to answer. "It's... complicated."

Too complicated to explain to a mere *kid*, apparently. Purpled hated being reminded of the age that he couldn't control or escape from.

Instead, he continued to scan the hallway, trying to make sense of everything, or even just dig up a single memory that he could use to piece everything together.

Someone walked past him, clad in a green cape and a set of lightweight armour. Purpled froze and averted his gaze, praying he wouldn't be spotted.

His wishful thinking amounted to nothing, and Dream stopped. He stared at him, a towering and silent figure.

His armour and clothes sparkled in the stained glass shadows. His eyes were dark and vacant under his askew mask, and his face was gaunt. His skin, marred with scars, stretched over his features and let the hollowness of his complexion truly stand out. If Purpled was alive while confined to his bed, then Dream was the exact opposite: he was nothing but a walking, breathing corpse.

A corpse that still struck fear into every fiber of Purpled's being, especially with the emerald eyes that glared at him – two shining, thunderstorms of green that shot at his soul with poisoned arrows.

The hunter expected him to snap at him, lashing out in an unbottled fit of anger. He didn't know why, he just did. All he got was a scowl and a slow blink, and Dream marched off.

A fold of his cloak billowed, momentarily revealing a collection of some sort of golden and emerald encrusted charms. They were concealed again just as quickly as their bearer moved away.

Purpled didn't know what they were, but he remembered finding a few, shattered but similar fragments pressed into the straw bed underneath him. He had brushed them away without so much as a second thought.

"Don't mind Dream," Wilbur assured the hunter in a whisper, clearly mistaking his preoccupation for disappointment, "it's nothing against you. He's just exhausted and thought you'd be a spitting image of your brother, you know? He's too much of a perfectionist nowadays."

The spitting image of Punz – *what a joke*. That would have been the day. That did beg another question, however. Purpled could have very well done without an extra load, yet here he was again, questioning the world around him. He hated the cage of confusion he was locked up in.

"Is Punz here?"

Wherever Dream was, Punz was usually not far behind and gods, Purpled wanted to beat the shit of something right now with his growing, violent restlessness – his own, arrogant brother would be perfect.

"No, he isn't," replied Wilbur, "or at least, I haven't seen him."

"Shame, I could use a new training dummy..."

That made Wilbur laugh. "Gods, you really do sound just like Tommy."

Purpled froze, the realization seeping in. He reminded Wilbur of Tommy. Again, he was seen as something to be used, and as someone else rather than himself and what he strived to be. At least nothing had changed drastically there.

"You're eager to fight then, are you?"

Still tight-lipped and cold, the hunter merely nodded.

"That's good, Purpled, that's good. We need more people like you."

You want more people like Tommy.

A hand suddenly appeared in front of his eyes, red fingertips rubbed raw by strings so close to him that they almost brushed the tip of his nose.

"Can you walk? I'd like to show you around here. You might even get the answers you're looking for."

Purpled hesitated. He stared at the friendly, outstretched hand before him, and bristled. Touching this man – this... maniac, this twisted soul – was akin to making a pact with demons themselves, and the hunter wanted none of that.

But again, the temptation overwhelmed his senses, his desire for answers and his thirsty curiosity reaching an uncontrollable level.

They took over him and before he could change his mind, Purpled grabbed Wilbur's hand. His palm was rough and gritty, and his fingers latched around him like the jaws of a beast, caging him in and sealing the deal. He was pulled to his feet and yanked forwards a couple of steps despite the floor spinning before him.

"Don't take too long," Wilbur reprimanded gently as he left Purpled to get over his sudden nausea. "There's a lot to see."

There was a lot to see, and Purpled soon found that out when he fell into a slightly unsteady walk beside Wilbur Soot.

Now he was taking the halls a lot slower, he realized just how heavy his body was, and how much walking actually hurt. He felt weak – maybe eating all of the stew wouldn't have been such a bad idea after all. Everything was too loud and too bright. He subconsciously moved to step in Wilbur's tall shadow, the only line of defense he had against the elements.

In a way, Purpled hadn't been wrong: the world around him was very much a church, or at least part of one.

The long halls they traversed, he soon found out, were part of a large, derelict monastery, and of which the closed off parts had apparently been transformed into a healing camp. The lines of beds, occupied and unoccupied, continued all the way down, and the sickly aroma of pultice and healing potions floated on the air. Patients were crammed together, some sleeping, some just regaining the use of their legs and attempting to stand and walk.

A healing camp indeed, but with only one apparent healer, according to Wilbur.

"He's the only one who knows how to do this stuff," he explained. The "stuff" in question was still unknown to Purpled. They came to the end of one of the corridors, and approached a set of heavy, rotting spruce doors. "That's where I think we complete each other. Dream knows how to recruit, and I know how to organize an army."

Purpled perked up abruptly. "An army?"

Wilbur paused momentarily, looked back, and smiled. "An army," he agreed, and pushed open the threshold.

Immediately, the sharp air of the outdoors whipped his face with a frigid lash, tousling his hair and almost knocking him over completely. The stuffy stench of old stones and herbs were whisked away, instead replaced with a tang on Purpled's tongue that rushed down his throat and pricked his nose.

The hunter braced his senses against all the sudden attacks from his surroundings, and narrowed his eyes against the sun.

From an endless jungle of gothic arches, stone pillars and colourful windows, he had emerged into a completely different world.

Mountainous barriers of dark slate-coloured stone reached up towards the heavens, capped with pearly snow and draped in rushing waterfalls. Like the cold, unmoving

ramparts of fortified castles, they surrounded the grassy valley languishing in their shadow, looking out over the sea of canvas tents pitched up across it.

There were so many of them, insides billowing up with the wind and shredded flags fluttering on the tops. Folds of the walls were pulled back and created single doorways or completely open air pavillions, revealing the insides. Some were filled with bunks, others with chests and racks of weapons. One of the completely opened tents sheltered a smithy, another a makeshift kitchen and rows of tables set with wooden bowls and cutlery. Small fires were lit everywhere, accompanied by the slamming of metal against metal and a chatter of voices.

Once Purpled was led into that world by Wilbur, he immediately let his shoulders sag.

Blacksmiths forging weapons and armour.

Soldiers sharing meagre rations around a game of die or stories of their glory days.

Troops training in the dusty, open clearings dotted around.

That was all that stretched out for as far as his eye could see – a military camp, and the preparations for impending battles. Finally, something he knew well.

"So, what is all this?" the hunter finally asked out loud, still taking in his surroundings. A hammer banged down on a steaming anvil, sending up sparks. "A new nation?"

Wilbur replied to his question with a rumbling hum of amusement. "A new nation? Ah, not exactly."

"But you're building an army."

"It's more of a peaceful coalition," Wilbur corrected, gesturing to a group of diverse characters off to the side.

So similar to all the others dotted around, Purpled finally gave them a good, long look. There were a couple of animal and monster hybrids, humans, elves, element-borns and even some that he couldn't name – but that wasn't what ultimately made him look twice.

They were clearly not meant to be on the same side, or behave as friendly as they were. There was a tabby cat dressed in dark leather overclothes, a dainty elf wrapped in a silk kimono, and a waterborn dressed in a heavy winter cloak, among others – the Badlands, Kinoko Kingdom and Snowchester respectively.

"A coalition." Purpled could definitely see that now. "A coalition for what, though?"

"Can an army not just be built up just in case?"

Of course it could be, but Purpled knew Wilbur – or at least he knew the stories about him. A calculated madman, cool when he wanted to be, fiery once his insanity breached the walls of his tormented mind. Every step, every decision he took was intentional and thought out. He was fond of Chekhov's gun, rumours used to say. It had taken the hunter an embarrassingly long time to realize it wasn't a literal kind of firearm the gunpowder enthusiast was fond of.

Not a literal one perhaps, but just as destructive when used well. Wilbur was a man of flourished words, deadly promises and morals as unmoving as bedrock. He had used it better than anyone had or ever would.

Therefore there was a reason and rhyme to this army. There had to be. Purpled just didn't see it yet, and Wilbur was certainly not ready to tell him.

"Can you fight?"

Purpled looked up at the sudden question, unable to hide his deeply offended expression.

"My apologies, of course you do."

Wilbur Soot continued to lead him through the camp, but Purpled could tell that his tune had changed. He was a lot more thoughtful and began to stop frequently, routinely scrutinizing armour and weapon stands, picking up the items and holding them briefly before putting them down again. Occasionally, he kept a few in his possession, slinging what he could carelessly over his shoulder. Purpled could just pick out a polished leather chestplate, lightweight and perfect for everyday wear or exhausting, sticky training sessions, along with a few other bits like arm guards and shin guards.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, they came out on a clear patch of land, devoid of tents. The ground was carpeted by short green grass and cut through by dusty skid marks. Three training dummies sculpted out of wood stood in perfect formation somewhere to the side, and racks of different weapons were dotted around. Wilbur turned back to Purpled for the first time in ages, a wide smile brightening up his features.

"Here." He handed him the sturdy leather armour he had salvaged on their way. "Put these on."

Purpled obliged, ignoring the small voice inside of him that screamed a reminder that he was not under Wilbur's command.

The armour fit snugly. Although the hunter was more used to netherite gear, he had to admit that the freedom the lighter leather gave him was a huge advantage. As a warrior who prided himself on his agility and swiftness in a fight with heavy protection, the prospect of fighting with lighter armour only boosted his self-confidence sky-high. He'd be unstoppable.

Wilbur came back towards him a moment later carrying a shield and a couple of iron swords. He tossed them to Purpled and kept one sword for himself.

"Up for a little sparring?" he asked, shrugging off his trenchcoat and the bright blue sheep's fleece that adorned his shoulders. He disposed of them in a messy heap on the floor, facing the hunter with nothing more than a yellow woollen jumper.

Purpled looked at him up and down. Wilbur had a height advantage, sure, but he didn't have a shield, or armour for that matter. Not only that, his grip on the hilt of his weapon was too flimsy and relaxed to be considered a threat of any sort. He'd be an easy victory.

Beating Wilbur Soot in hand-to-hand combat. Now that would be a story worth bragging about.

Purpled smirked and nodded, getting into a strong stance. "I'm ready."

He'd go easy on him, he told himself, deciding that Wilbur deserved just a little chance to get a couple of swings in. Dignity was always a cruel thing to lose so easily.

Wilbur nodded back. "Good."

There was no shout of "go".

Blades collided in the blink of an eye, and Purpled stumbled backwards with a cry of surprise. He dropped the shield and bent his knees, struggling under the sheer force of Wilbur's swing. He had to put both hands on his hilt to keep the other sword away from his face, and even that was hard enough to do in itself.

From the weakened grasp Purpled had first noted, Wilbur's had become stronger than anything he had ever faced before, a crushing force threatening to push him back into the ground.

"You call that a defensive stance? Pathetic."

Wilbur's foot connected with Purpled's knee and with a deft flick of his blade, sent him rolling and sprawling across the training ground. The rough, dry dirt and sharp grass cut his palms and scraped his knees. Dust filled his throat and his lungs, and he coughed violently.

A moment later, something whizzed past his ear and struck the ground. The hunter yelped and dodged, just missing another shot that would have very likely impaled him between his eyes.

He dove back across the floor and reclaimed his fallen shield, raising it over his head just as three more arrows pelted down on him in quick succession.

"The ground is a place of weakness. You'll be at everyone's mercy if you let yourself be beaten down."

Purpled scrambled to his feet, breathing heavily and peeping out from behind his shield.

Wilbur Soot was standing only a few feet away, his sword abandoned near a weapon rack piled high with other blades and tools. Two of his fingers were pulling back a bowstring, and the end of the arrow was lined up perfectly with his eye.

His light brown eyes, framed with wide, rounded spectacles – blown out, sparkling with a malicious glint.

Crazed.

There was the madman everyone knew.

Wilbur shot the arrow and this time, Purpled was aware enough to parry it with his sword. He tightened his grip on both his blade and his shield and hunched his shoulders.

He felt dizzy. His body was still heavy and stiff. His muscles burned. He was just about ready to collapse. And yet, he was too proud to call the entire thing to a halt.

He watched as Wilbur threw the bow and quiver away, reaching instead for a large, double ended battleaxe. With one hand, he swung it around as if it was nothing, a weightless feather. The crazed look never left his face.

"You think you're so tough, don't you?" Wilbur hissed, gliding towards Purpled with the undulating and dangerous grace of a serpent. The shine of the blade caught the sun, striking Purpled's vision with blinding rays. "The world is out to kill you, boy."

He swung the axe, just barely missing cutting Purpled in two. The hunter leapt aside and when the next swing came, painstakingly attempted to wrench it out of the man's grasp.

"You may think this is nothing, but Technoblade would never go so easy on you. Warriors like him have no control, no mercy."

Purpled was complete and utterly drained, his strength trickling out of him like blood. His limbs were trembling and he was severely off balance. Every step almost sent him back down to the dusty ground, to defeat.

Technoblade might have perhaps not had any mercy, but he hoped Wilbur did. He hoped that Wilbur could see his state and call the whole thing off.

Purpled didn't want to fight, but he didn't want to be the one to accept defeat either.

His body turned warm, too warm, and he screamed as white-hot needles peppered his skin. The sound of Wilbur dusting off his hands resonated somewhere behind him, and a match was blown out.

"And those are just the normal weapons! What if a fireborn comes running at you, huh? What do you do then?"

Purpled dropped the shield and frantically began to pat himself down, ridding his clothes and skin of the biting flames that threatened to consume him entirely.

"You're burning, so what? By the time you've dealt with the fire, Sapnap would have killed you! Or perhaps someone else will take their chance to strike."

Purpled coughed through the smoke, the ashes only making breathing harder. They filled up his already frail lungs and made his eyes water, painful tears starting to course down his face.

"And above all else, keep your hand at the level of your eyes!"

Wilbur pounced on him from behind, wrapping a rough rope around his neck and pulled tightly. Purpled dropped his sword and reached up, trying desperately to claw at the noose around his throat.

Breathing was hard. Breathing was impossible.

He had no way of getting out of it, and the hunter couldn't do anything but fall limply. He was done with it all, done.

His back slumped into Wilbur's chest. A dark chuckle echoed right beside his ear.

"Well done, Tommy, well done. Playing dead could indeed save your life."

Purpled fell heavily to the ground, head and senses ringing in agony. The rope was still hanging around his neck, looser now, but still just as scratchy and dangerous. One single yank could snap his neck. He didn't have the energy to slip it off, and instead lay still. His violet eyes wandered around.

The sky, so blue and bright, dotted with circling eagles. Purpled had never paid attention to it before, because he was never pushed to the ground. He had never been in such a position of weakness.

He felt icky. His skin was raw and bruised, slick with sweat and grime. He took the time to finally and truly hate the feeling, no longer a mark of a well-earned victory.

He tried to roll over to the side, suppressing a whimper of pain. Everything hurt, and he was too brain dead to properly take note of it all.

He looked at Wilbur. The madman had since moved away, back to the weapon rack with a jolly hum. His hand hovered over one of the weapons that Purpled's blurry vision could barely distinguish from afar.

Wilbur hesitated a moment longer, then shook his head with a sinister tut. "The main trident threat is dead, so count yourself lucky."

His hands continued to drift along the multitude of blades and handles, with the intricate concentration and delight of a butcher choosing the right tool to cut his meat.

And his lamb, with a neck rubbed raw and limbs sprawled out on the hard ground, could do nothing but wait for the slaughter.

Purpled thought that was it, that either the training would stop there, or that he would be released from his pain. He found a little solace in that acceptance.

Then, the whispers finally reached his ears.

A chatter of hushed voices rose all around him, distant enough to be confused as background noise, close enough to be drinking up the scene. It seemed that a crowd had gathered around the training field. It was unknown when they had started to pour in, or what they had seen of the fight, but their mocking jeers and snarky comments proved to be enough.

"I thought Wilbur was the weak one here, but holy shit." A voice, sounding suspiciously like Schlatt, echoed louder than the others – deliberately, no doubt. "I had my money on the kid."

Purpled was trapped in a gladiator ring, a circus, a zoo. He was a wild animal to be watched and commented on. For the first time, he finally and truly felt his dignity and bold reputation crumble into dust.

A reputation he had sacrificed so much to build, including a stable, peaceful life and his brother's own affections.

"Soldiers don't hide, Grayson. They fight."

Something in Purpled hardened. Something turned to stone – his heart, his resolve, his muscles that had been reduced to no more than mush. He lifted his head up. His vision was still spinning, but he soon managed to steady it with a deep breath.

At last, the whole world came back to him. Everything was sharper, clearer, just how it should have been. The animalistic instincts that had always earned Purpled his fame had flowed once more into his body.

He cast a sharp look at the gathering. If they wanted a show, he'd give them a show alright.

Wilbur's back was still turned. Purpled silently removed the rope around his neck and picked up his sword before silently getting to his feet. The blade hissed against the grass. No one moved, no one said a word.

The only sound still echoing across the clearing was Wilbur's gleeful humming, paired with a mean little smirk that twisted his fair features. Purpled was going to wipe that smile right off his face.

He ran towards the man at full force and with a sharp kick, knocked him violently to the floor. The sound that escaped the madman was glorious; a pained, surprised little squeal. Pathetic and weak. It was true music to his ears – it was the perfect prize for him.

Wilbur Soot stared up at Purpled, his shock quickly melting to a sinister satisfaction. "Good, Purpled!" he praised. "I knew you had it in you!"

Praise or mockery, Purpled didn't know anymore. Everything Wilbur seemed to do had been an act, a sickly, touching personality he could switch on and off like a redstone lamp. All the care, all the kindness the man had given him meant nothing anymore.

Wilbur managed to yank Purpled down by his leather chestplate, sending the hunter tumbling once again to the ground. This time, however, he got up quickly, much quicker than Wilbur, and lunged again.

The fight continued for a long time. Purpled had the upper hand this time, but Wilbur was still good with his body and knew just where to punch and kick to destabilize his opponent, as well as throwing out meaningless yet uplifting comments and sweet words to try and throw him off his rhythm.

Purpled was immune to it all, and he kept attacking. Attacking, attacking, attacking, and nothing but that. He felt like he hadn't fought in ages, and the adrenaline that promised him victory spurred him on until he felt more powerful than the gods themselves.

The true power trip, however, was when he finally managed to pin Wilbur flat on his back and straddle his chest, rendering him utterly helpless and unable to move.

The madman tried to squirm out from underneath him like a worm and when that failed, simply threw his head back with a delirious, drunken grin and a shrill laugh.

"Come on then," he cackled, "stab me."

So Purpled did.

The tip of his sword cut easily through the soft muscle of Wilbur's bicep, like a knife through creamy butter. He pushed and pushed, watching as the buttercup fabric around his blade bled to a dark red.

The scream it pulled out from Wilbur was deafening – a banshee-like howl of searing agony, the flames of the Nether scorching him alive.

After a while, the blade finally hit the dusty ground underneath, and Purpled pulled away. His opponent was still pinned down, this time with something other than the hunter's weight. The sword stood perfectly and horrifyingly upright. Wilbur's cries had faded into an orchestra of sharp, exhausted pants, and his eyes had at long last lost the insanity that had plagued them.

"Good fight," he bit out through his obvious pain, giving him a forced but undoubtedly relieved smile.

Purpled ignored him, and instead turned to the crowd amassed on the sidelines. No one spoke, no one moved. Even the mountains seemed to hold their breath, freezing time in the valley below them.

The hunter raised his head and glared at each spectator in turn. The fear in their eyes was apparent – he had just single handedly risen from a state of utter defeat to finally bringing down Wilbur Soot himself, after all – but there was a definite shadow of something else in them.

Awe, and respect.

The sickly, cowardly kid in the healing ward had earned their *respect*.

Purpled scowled at them all, puffing up his chest and tightening a loose buckle on his leather armour. He wasn't about to let their admiration waver so soon.

"Take that as a warning," the hunter said, raising his voice so that the entire mountain chain could hear him. "Next time, I won't be so merciful."

Then, he turned away and strode off. The crowd seemed to activate and snap back to reality, whispering among themselves about the ruthless and bold warrior that had left them. Some rushed to help Wilbur.

Purpled's exit was cold, powerful and proud, without a look back or a shadow of remorse to sway his delicious victory.

He only realized later that he was the spitting image of Punz in that moment and for once, it felt *great*.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: The Undead Army

He had never been the "popular" kid on the streets, nor the most feared. That was his brother's job. So all his life, Purpled had lived and worked in utter secrecy – seen when people wanted him to be, disappearing when they didn't.

But now he was here, part of what was known among the soldiers as "the undead army", everything was different. Some divinity had flipped a switch, and Purpled's fortunes had changed.

Whether it was for the better or the worse he couldn't tell for sure. All he knew was that since his battle with Wilbur, he was respected by all – or, just as likely, feared too.

He was inclined to say that it was going well.

His every movement was scrutinized from afar, sure, but never commented on or interfered with. He could walk where he wanted without being questioned or cut off. Once he moved out of the monastery's healing ward, he was given first pick of a bunk in one of the new, pitched up canvas dormitories, despite it already being fully occupied. His usual seat in one of the mess tents was always left vacant for his use – not that he would have slaughtered anyone if they did accidentally sit there. Any weapon he wanted to take, he took, any single bit of armour as well.

And everyone just *let* him do what he wanted. He was essentially royalty in the army where there clearly was none – or at least very few, and even then they hid it exceptionally well. That suited him reasonably well. At least he wouldn't have to worry about any form of open animosity towards him or bullying, and he would be able to focus on more important things, such as finally getting his burning questions answered.

One evening, he decided to shoot his shot. With his soup ration in one hand and bread in another, he got up from his usual, shadowed spot at the end of one of the tables, and looked around for another.

The open tent sheltering a few more lines of wobbling wooden tables was one of many scattered around the military camp. The unstable, slightly drafty eating halls weren't comfortable by any means, and the frozen dinners on particularly blustery nights could

attest to that fact, but when seated close enough to the cooking pots and bonfire roast, the warmth was cozy.

The cauldrons also spat and bubbled loudly, making any conversations around them virtually inaudible to anyone else. It was the perfect place to ask potentially damning or indiscreet questions.

As Purpled strode towards the front, he kept a watchful eye out for any available seats and some promising company. Others stared as he walked past them, quickly diverting their eyes when he'd briefly cross their gaze. The sharp sword swinging around his belt was clearly menacing enough, even if the hunter's hands were nowhere near it.

At long last, his eagle-eyed vision picked out a single empty spot on a bench close to the fires and the cooking, just as he'd originally wanted. The four figures that sat near it seemed like decent people as well, a lot more quiet and reserved than many of the other feasters that weren't afraid to sing boisterously, shout tall tales or throw food across one side of the room to the other.

Cementing his decision, Purpled corrected his posture and made his way towards them.

He tuned out the parasitic echoes and sharp noises of the evening world around him in order to hone in on his new tablemates – a final precaution. With enough concentration and as he got closer, he could just make out their conversation.

"... and then bang! I was gone. Didn't even see it comin'," grunted the largest of the four – a large, bloated hog. He puffed out a few clouds of smoke out of his pipe, then snorted and shook his head. "I was meant to retire in two days. Two days! Damned way to go, ain't it?"

"We thought those gosh darn bandits had been chased off for good!" angrily yapped the small fennec beside him. "Swore we'd be at peace and everythin'!"

"Y'know what, Ron," the hog sighed, "maybe we were a lil' too hopeful back then. Should've known somethin' was up when that Karl kid refused to become the next sheriff. Frickin' oracle, if I didn't know better. He knew we were in the shit and couldn't see how to get us out, so he scrambled."

"Still, count yourself lucky," interrupted another figure, this time cloaked in ragged green, his hood thrown back. His entire face and neck, even from afar, were tarnished by serious-looking scars, dark marks and missing chunks of skin. "At least you got to fight and weren't burned by your own people. Crops won't grow, weather won't brighten up,

people start dying in their sleep and before you know it, they're tying you to a stake and holding you responsible."

"And lemme guess, you ain't."

"Never had been, and never will be. Thick headed fools, the lot of them." The burned figure cast a brief but spiteful glance aside, eyeballing the rest of the mess tent, before turning back to the talk at hand. "What about you, m'lady?"

"Me?" softly replied the woman in their little circle. Her features were soft and rounded, oozing beauty and a gentleness that didn't truly belong in the here of bitterness and fury she was sitting with.

"Yeah, you," Burn-Face nodded, taking a large swig of his ale. "Pretty princesses like you don't usually get scars as big as yours."

The lady traced a velvet finger over her neck, tracing a large and noticeable sword slash over her collarbone. "Murder," she murmured with a slight shudder. "We were tricked by a man we all trusted."

"Oh yeah? What kind of royal scandal did you get involved in to result in that?"

"No scandal, simply a masquerade gone wrong."

"Heard something about that," the hog agreed, then pointed the end of his pipe at her. "You're Lady Lyaria, right?"

She nodded. A storm swept over her features. "Gods, if I ever see that Billiam again, I'll deal with him myself..."

"Billiam, huh?" he scoffed, pouring himself another pint. "*Sir* Billiam? Well there's a name I ain't heard in a while. Nasty piece of work, wasn't he?" He held his cup up, a dark chuckle rising with it. "Here's to that miserable bastard and all the dang demons that kicked our buckets too soon."

The four clinked their drinks together with half-hearted mutters of "cheers", then immediately fell into a comfortable and solemn silence.

Purpled decided to make his move. "Is this seat taken?" he asked, gesturing to the empty spot in question.

In unison, the entire group turned their heads towards him, a fearful shock hidden behind their gazes. The only one who didn't seem frightened, simply a little surprised, was the hog, who took another puff of his pipe and eyes the newcomer from head to toe.

"S'ppose not," he grunted, inviting him to join them with a jerk of his head.

With a silent nod of thanks, Purpled sat down, laying down his food before turning to the others. They were still eyeing him like frightened baby deer, eyes ogling at his presence as if he was a monster himself. In any other moment, he would have snapped back and called them out on their cowardice, but he instead decided to get off on the right foot and greeted them all individually and respectfully.

He even reached out to kiss the back of Lady Lyaria's hand. Up close, she looked even more like an aristocrat than he had first assumed, and where there was aristocracy, there were usually benefits, and benefits for Purpled usually meant money.

"Your Majesty," he said, only pulling away once she let out a chiming, expensive laugh.

"You flatter me," she hummed, "but I'm not royalty. Upper middle class at best."

The golden waves of hair crowning her head begged to disagree, but Purpled didn't push. He sat back and feigned to dig into his dinner.

"Cornelius," Burn-Face introduced himself, reaching out a carbonated hand. Again, the wariness was still there, but he seemed to have decided to stay somewhat civil. Purpled returned his courtesy, then turned to the next two.

Both of them had undoubtedly come from around the same parts: their clothes, as dusty and sandy-coloured as each other's as well as their shared, colloquial twang to their speech patterns seemed to confirm it.

The little fennec continued to cower behind his companion, but had still summoned enough courage to shove his Stetson hat back on his head and squeak out his name.

"Ron Ronson," he said, giving a shaking and clumsy bow, and then in a quick and trembling tone; "like my father before me, and his father before him."

There was definitely a story there that part of Purpled was curious to know, but he was too lazy to try to unpack it or trigger a genealogical rant. He instead looked at the final member of the group.

The hog was the most threatening of the four. With an ugly, battle scarred face, a bushy moustache sitting over his upper lip and two small, mean eyes that twinkled in the dim orange glow of the fire, he also seemed to be the only one unafraid of the hunter's presence.

"Sheriff Sherman Thompson," he grunted, twirling the golden star on the blood red bandana tied around his flabby neck.

Now introductions had been gotten over and done with, Purpled hid the small sigh of relief and tried to get straight to the point. "I'm—"

"We all know who you are," interrupted Sheriff Thompson, giving him another once-over. "You're that kid who beat Wilbur Soot. I have to say, you've got some gall and some skills to do something like that."

Purpled bit back the "more than you" retort that almost reached his mouth, eyeing the dried and obvious gunshot wound on the hog's checkered shirt. Such a simple, unremarkable way to die. What had he said it was from again, bandits? A monster of a beast like him, taken out by mere robbers – it was a little pathetic.

"Great shots," Ron piped up again, vigorously agreeing with his brick house of a friend.

"Thanks," the hunter replied, letting down his guard just enough to bask once more in the praise he was getting.

"Which makes me wonder," Sheriff Thompson hummed, stuffing more tobacco into his pipe and lighting it, "why?"

"Why what?"

He puffed out a smoke ring. "Why would someone like you wanna sit with people like us? Doesn't make any darn sense, if ya ask me."

It made sense to *Purpled*, and he decided to come clean. "I want to ask you some questions," he said, looking at them each in turn. "There's only one thing here no one gives me, and that's proper answers."

This time, Cornelius was the one to scoff. "And you thought that we of all people could help you?" He whistled and took another swig of his drink. "Best jest I've heard for centuries..."

"You're all being bullies," Lyaria tutted, swatting a dainty hand at the men and giving Purpled a warm smile. "We might not be the best ones to ask, but we'll definitely try our best to help you."

The hunter bit his tongue to stay quiet. He needed far more than people "trying" but with the absence of any certain sources, his new benchmates were his best option.

"First of all," he began, "what is this place?"

"Look around you, what does it look like?" Cornelius shrugged. "A military camp lost somewhere in the mountains. There's needing answers, and there's being blind."

Purpled had to use all of his self-control to keep his hands off the hilt of his sword, and instead pushed out his sentences through gritted teeth. "I am aware of that, but that still doesn't tell me anything. Which mountain range? Why an army? *Whose* army?"

He already had a good idea for the last one, but he wanted to be sure.

"We're just as clueless as you, kid," Sheriff Thompson sighed. "All we know is just wakin' up and bein' here. Ain't heaven, ain't hell, and too comfortable to be any goddamn purgatory. We're all just takin' it as it comes."

"Which is?"

"Sparrin', eatin', sleepin'. The works. The only other thin' we could tell you is that we were all dead at some point."

The Undead Army.

Finally, something made sense. "And who leads it?" Purpled wanted to know.

The hog lingered once more on his answer, narrowing his beady eyes at the hunter. "Somethin' tell me you already know that. A man with a mask, smilin' like the devil himself. Spends most of his time up in the cloister. Ain't seen him down 'ere in a while."

"He's darn tootin' scary," shivered Ron.

"Seems pretty strong too," added Cornelius. "Powerful, a true leader. Dream's his name, or so some say."

"He looks sad," Lyaria sighed, her bright blue eyes full of compassion, "drained, even. He's carrying a whole world on his shoulders that no one can see. He sometimes strolls the camp at night, alone – always alone. A walking tragedy."

A walking tragedy was a far nicer way to describe the villain. Purpled thought him more as a harbinger of death and destruction. Never as a misunderstood, sad and lonely little boy.

He decided to set the records straight once and for all. "But do you know him for what he really is?" he asked, staring at them seriously each in turn. "Do you know who he is, what he's done to many here and beyond?"

He expected his questions to be met by shocked expressions and pleas to go on and enlighten them all. Instead, he got nonchalant nods.

"We do," Cornelius said.

Purpled was still dumbfounded. "Then why haven't you ever thought of overthrowing him? I mean, look!" He gestured to the entire tent full of people. The number of diners itself could form three entire regiments – and that was only one of the many messes littered around the mountain range! "You've got the numbers, and if he's really as drained as you say he is, then taking him down should be easy enough! He's wronged most of these people. Why don't you go after him?"

He knew that his words had hit home from the silence he was met with. The four strangers looked at each other uneasily.

"Listen, kid," Sheriff Thompson, the designated spokeshog for the entire group said, "we don't know ya. We don't know who you really are, how ya died, or what grudges you hold, just like you know nothin' of us. You don't like Dream, and we can all see why. We would hate him too. But what you need to know is that whatever he's done, he gave us another life. He gave us a chance to live again, kid, and he is promisin' us somethin' else too, somethin' many of us didn't get."

"Promised what?"

"Justice, and that's worth a lot."

And with that, the conversation was closed. Purpled didn't probe any further, and instead spent the rest of the evening in the small, odd group's company, finishing his meal and listening dutifully to the stories he was told.

Tales of medieval villages and witch trials, high society balls and masquerades, and the dusty, barren lands of a wild west once stretching out near some snowy mountains – Purpled wondered if that was where Las Nevadas now stood.

History had never truly interested Purpled, unless everything came from the past's mouths themselves. To think that he was hundreds, even thousands of years younger than the people he now shared a card game and sour, bitter ale with. He decided that they were the only ones he'd allow to call him "kid". They were the only ones who were entitled to do so.

And yet, something still bugged him. The Undead Army, and the praises being sung about Dream that showed that all those he encountered were on his side one way or another. Even fallen L'Manbergians and other enemies that had perished in one of the SMP's many battles – some by the Nightmare's own hand – seemed to have found a new appreciation for the masked menace.

It was worrying how swiftly loyalties had changed, and all over simple things. Gratitude, and the promise of justice.

What justice? What kind of justice could Dream himself possibly be able to give them? Most likely a fake one, or a ghastly one covered by a myriad of lies and manipulation. Whatever it was, it had been enough to somehow bring together friends, enemies and the ghosts of times long gone to fight by the Nightmare's side.

But the answers he was given were still hazy, and not the ones he needed. To find them, he'd need to seek them out himself, and he knew just the perfect place to do so.

When he parted ways with the Sheriff, Ron, Cornelius and Lyaria and when the rest of the feasters began to quieten down for the night, he left the mess tent. Under the cover of darkness, he made his way back up to the monastery.

As soon as he set foot through the arched door, he knew he shouldn't have come. The shadows stretched across the stone floors and walls, beckoning puddles of darkness that swallowed the inside whole. The strangely familiar ambiance had changed drastically – he felt like he was stepping into a dark, dingy tomb.

The patients and the dim lanterns swinging over their billets only added to that unsettling sensation, their sleeping forms likened to the cold stone effigies laid to rest on top of crypts. Only a couple shifted and rolled over to reassure Purpled that that wasn't the case, but even then, nothing ever wavered. Even the lingering smell of Healing potions had turned to a stuffy, incense-like odour in the night.

In a place with so much life, all Purpled was reminded of was death.

He kept his wits about him and kept going, exploring the structure as intricately as he could. At one point, he came out through a door and emerged into a square garden surrounded by the classic, twisting arches synonymous with cloisters. A round fountain sat in the middle, dried up and crawling with briar. On top of it stood a silvery blue trident, wedged between the rocks with its prongs turned up to the thin silver sliver of the moon in the sky. It looked to be in good condition, polished and newly sharpened, displayed like a trophy. A red strip of material fluttered around the handle like a flag.

Purpled looked at it for a moment longer, trying to ignore the itchy familiarity of the weapon that began to irritate his mind.

Then, he turned away and continued on. He had no idea what he was looking for exactly – he just wanted to find something that made *sense*. And yet, after an hour or so spent aimlessly wandering around, he had still found none. There was only one spot in the monastery he hadn't been to yet: the main chapel, and its crooked bell-tower jutting out just above the mossy, damaged roof that lined the edges of the courtyard.

Using the dark, jagged outline as a guide, he snaked his way towards it through the shadows, eventually finding the carved wooden door that closed it off from the rest of the building. It was locked.

Purpled backtracked and hauled himself onto the nearest roof. He scaled up the side of the belfry and squeezed himself through the opening at the top. He was almost certain that the entire tower trembled as he did so, and quickly tried to find a stable perch.

A rusty brass bell hung from the flaking roof above, still shining in the dark despite its obvious age. Purpled braced himself and took a leap of faith, grabbing hold of the long rope cascading down from underneath and sliding effortlessly down to the ground. He landed deftly and let go.

The tocsin chimed with a deafening boom, brooding and somber in the dark. Previously sleeping bats screeched and escaped their perches, taking off into the night.

Purpled froze, but not because of the noise. His feet slipped against something hard and he struggled to regain his balance. Immediately, they hit something else and he wobbled again. He had to hang on to the sally this time, sending the bell into another thundering frenzy.

The hunter had landed in the middle of a treasure trove. Piles of gold almost as high as the arched ceiling of the nave were littered around the room, with even more glittering splendor layering the cracked and tiled floor. There was a path winding between them; a small one granted, no wider than a man's walk, but a path nevertheless that let the cold floor beneath seep through. He rushed to join it before he tumbled a third time, and finally took a moment to properly look around.

The chapel – although it was far too big, large enough to be a full on church – was made of stormy grey stone. It looked far worse for wear and too dark to provide any poor devout comfort. Even the once vibrant fresques and paintings on the walls were torn and blurred by water damage. The shadows had of course still managed to spread inside, and the only light came from the gold.

They weren't coins or chalices, but rather gem-encrusted charms just like the ones Purpled had seen hanging from Dream's belt that other time.

Now he could inspect them a lot closer, he could finally see what they really were – even if he was just as clueless as before. Little winged characters with what looked like big noses, and emerald eyes. Most were lit and shone with an otherworldly glow, but others were as dull and lifeless as the church around them.

Purpled couldn't make any sense of any of it. All potential explanations never lined up with small, insignificant details, and it drove him insane. The only thing he was certain of was that these... totems... had something to do with this mass revival and building of an army.

The other thing he was sure of was that he wasn't supposed to be there, and that the church door had been locked for a reason.

And that the bell had been very loud.

A key turned in a lock, and a click resounded through the cold, dry air.

Purpled froze, and immediately leapt for cover, wedging his slender body between one of the staggering piles of totems and the pedestal of a headless angel statue. He tried desperately to still his breathing and his beating heart, then risked a look out from his hiding place.

One of the previously locked doors creaked open. A flaming orange beam cast a dancing sheen in the corner. Footsteps came closer, and Dream stepped into the hunter's line of vision.

His mask was off and hooked around his belt but his armour was still on, along with his green cloak. His face was still as sunken in and covered in scars. He looked no different since Purpled had last seen him. In fact, he looked like he hadn't slept since, with bloodshot eyes and a tense stance.

It only made him look more terrifying, like a raging bloodhound sensing out its prey.

Dream swung his flaming torch around a few times, finally breaking the endless shadows. Purpled edged a little further into his hiding place, holding his breath.

The Nightmare said nothing, and after scanning his surroundings a few times, turned his head up to the steeple. The bell's rope was still swaying from side to side, and he finally lowered his light.

"Damn bats," he cursed in a whisper.

After that, Purpled expected him to leave, if only to allow the hunter to breathe and move freely again. He was sorely disappointed and surprised when Dream did none of the sort.

He raised his torch aloft once again, and headed towards one of the larger piles of totems. A symphony of clanks and chimes soon followed as he began to rummage through the gold, deeply invested in a search Purpled knew nothing about. He seemed pretty determined and frustrated. To the hunter, Dream looked delusional – all the totems were the same.

Purpled peered a little further out from behind his own pile of gold, straining his senses to try and catch the mumblings that had started to escape Dream's mouth.

"C'mon, where are you?" the Nightmare grumbled, his searching getting more frantic by the minute. "I know you're here somewhere, you have to be... I need you..."

At the end of his sentence, his voice wobbled, and the hunter was taken aback. Dream's voice had a tremor. The great, dangerous Dream sounded... unsure of himself. Scared. Or even, perhaps as Lyaria said earlier that same night, broken and sad.

A walking tragedy. Purpled could sort of see that now.

Dream's frantic rummaging suddenly stopped, and the warrior reeled back to his full height. He turned around, emerald eyes blown wide and his forehead creasing with a faint trace of something akin to worry. He scanned the rest of the room, running a hand

through his hair. He seemed disoriented, as if he was lost in a sea with no ship or treasure in sight. Whatever he was looking for, he certainly couldn't find it, or even know where to begin to do so.

"Sam," he whispered, almost whimpering. The name soared up to the broken stained glass windows above like a prayer. "I need you. Schlatt's an idiot, Wilbur's a maniac and Purpled's just a scared kid. I need you..."

At the mention of his name, a sharp jab of cold air shot down the hunter's spine and he shivered violently. Even with seeing the Nightmare in such a state of vulnerability, the knowledge that his name was lingering in his mind was just as terrifying. He had to get out.

His violet eyes briefly darted up to the bell again. The belfry was much higher from underneath than it had seemed from the roof, and his hands were already burning from when he had slid down the first time. The ascent would only be so much more precarious. The stained glass windows were too high as well. There was only one solution.

The door, and he had to make it in time before Dream left and locked it again behind him. With everything that he had just heard and seen, the hunter was more than ready to make a run for it.

When Dream turned his back again, Purpled made his first move. A move that unfortunately didn't bring him any further than a single footstep. His boot hit a stray totem on the floor, sending it sliding towards the nearest pillar. The sound of metal on stone shattered the silence of the church, and sealed Purpled's doom.

"Who's there?"

The voice that hissed and spat like the torch's flame was no longer small and anxious. It was dangerous, deathly even.

Fight or flight. Purpled could have taken his chance and bolted. However, for all he knew, Dream could be far faster than him, or he could have an enderpearl, or he could shoot him with a concealed bow and a poisoned arrow. Dream also undoubtedly knew the terrain better than Purpled ever would.

His fear, although he hated to admit it, also paralyzed him. He couldn't run even if he wanted to.

Fight. He couldn't do that either. He would be a fool to ever think he'd be able to beat Dream. Wilbur was one thing, but the Nightmare was a whole other.

He instead decided to step out from the shadows, and face the music of the night.

As soon as Dream's sharp emerald glare landed on him, his eyebrows darted up in surprise. He lowered his torch and tilted his head.

"Purpled," he called, his voice even and calm, "is that you?"

Trying to control his trembling legs, Purpled stepped a little further into the light. With his head held high, he nodded.

The Nightmare let out what could only be described as a relieved chuckle, and he threw his head backwards. "Thank the gods, I thought you were a creeper or something. Can't have one blowing up these precious things."

To prove his point, he grabbed a handful of totems by their thin leather straps and slid them onto his belt. Purpled still said nothing.

"What are you doing here?"

The question was inevitable.

"Curiosity," the hunter replied, hoping that his answer would be enough and well-received.

It seemed to be, as Dream cracked a smile. Not a sickening and twisted grin of glee, or a sneer of cold command, or even a crazed, bloodthirsty grimace. Just a smile, perhaps even one of endearment as he looked at the curious kid who had been cowering underneath the eyeless gaze of a decapitated angel.

"Walk with me."

It wasn't an invitation – Purpled clearly detected the sharp edges of a threat. Any and all reassurance of being let off the hook vanished. He shut his mouth and obeyed quietly, quickly slipping out of the door Dream so generously held open for him.

The walk back through the monastery was just as dark, despite the obscurity being banished by the glare of the fiery torch. Dream's gloved hand on his shoulder was heavy, guiding him out of the maze of halls and arches like he was a misbehaving child

caught with his hand in the cookie jar. The hunter was extremely careful not to place a single foot out of line.

If Wilbur had been eager to attack him for no reason, he didn't want to know what Dream himself would do if he gave him the leeway to.

When he finally reached the entrance in one piece and stepped out into the night, Purpled breathed out a sigh of relief. He thought that Dream would finally let him go and tell him to "run along, now" before disappearing back inside to resume his shady activities.

Again, there was no such luck, as the green warrior locked the doors behind them. "Come with me," he told the hunter, leaving the torch on a stand fixed to the wall.

Again, Purpled obeyed without a fuss, following the masked menace towards the mountainside lake.

Dream led him towards the rocks and started up a small dusty path snaking between the boulders. It winded upwards, and they followed it. The world below started to get smaller and smaller as they ascended, and Purpled inhaled a nervous breath. A fall from this height would kill him, and he was instantly reminded of the shattered life on his foot.

A fall, or an explosion. Whichever one it was, the hunter was worried that history would repeat itself once again now he was walking side by side with the Nightmare himself.

After a long, silent trek, they finally came to a flat ledge, smoothed by passing time and the rough rush of waters that rushed over them during the thaws. There, Dream took a few steps closer to the edge, and sat down. He patted the ground beside him. Purpled approached cautiously and sat down as well, shuffling backwards away from the precipice.

Far, far underneath their perch stretched the lake. The perfectly flat surface and black waters reflected the stars and jagged peaks above. The silence was only broken by the gentle gushing of the small waterfall gushing down the side of the rock face beside them. Where the water ended, the camp began, and Purpled finally got to see the whole valley in all its glory.

The inside of the tents burned with a soft orange hue, glowing like candles in the night. Curling silver smoke was still rising from the stray torches and fire pits littered across the field. All around the dark, imposing teeth of the mountain chain sat silently, cradling the

gems in their jaws. The faint, whistling breeze carried another sound to the two figures perched on the mountainside; a soft, plucky little melody Purpled recognized. The song was calming, but the knowledge of who it was coming from was not.

"It's quiet up here," Dream suddenly said. "No people, no worries, and I can still hear Wilbur's playing. It's a little guilty pleasure of mine."

Purpled risked a glance towards him, and found the warrior smiling. Again, there was nothing sinister about it.

"It's... nice," he agreed, averting his eyes once again. His sword was still by his side. He still had his armour on. He was agile enough to scale the mountains if needed. He would maybe be alright.

"Curious, huh?" Dream grinned as if he was remembering a fond memory. A fond memory that wasn't so ancient, despite what his nostalgic chuckle would lead to believe. "Don't get much of that nowadays. Everyone seems too scared to ask questions, but not you. You've been asking a lot of them." As Purpled opened his mouth to reply, Dream waved him into silence. "Don't try to deny it, people talk. That's one thing that doesn't change throughout history."

"I apologize," the hunter managed to force out after the initial shock of being found out. His sword was still there. Good.

"Why?"

"Curiosity can be dangerous."

"Are you scared I'm going to kill you?"

Purpled thought deeply for a moment. No, he wasn't. He could beat Dream if it ever came to a one-on-one fight, he was pretty sure of that. But was he worried that Dream *would* attempt to kill him? Yes, he had to confess he was.

Not that he'd ever admit that out loud.

"I'm just wary," he replied.

"You're not as reckless as your brother made you out to be."

He snorted. "Well, he *is* Punz."

"That is a good and valid point," Dream hummed, flashing him another smile.

Another smile. Always the smiles.

"Is he here?" Purpled asked, trying to change the subject.

"Unless he died recently, no."

That single sentence had just confirmed everything Purpled was suspecting. "So, everyone here is dead."

"Were dead, yes. They all seem pretty alive to me." As if to answer him, a cacophony of laughs and applause echoed from below.

"But how? How are they—" He paused. "— how are *we* alive?"

"It's a long, long story."

"I have all night."

Dream looked over at him, his emerald eyes full of an emotion Purpled was simultaneously accustomed and unaccustomed to seeing on someone's features. A strange mix of apprehension and respect.

"It's a long story because I don't know where to start, how to follow through, or where to end," he began. "It's also a long story because I don't want to tell it."

That was a finality if Purpled had ever heard one. "Ok."

"You're not satisfied, are you?"

"No." The best course of action was to be honest – there was more chance of karma to be in his favour that way.

Deep down, however, he knew that he should have known better. After all, Dream constantly seemed to defy the laws of the gods and of fate and even when they did catch up with him, he wasn't their prisoner for long. Which was the case with Pandora's Vault.

"I thought you were trapped in the Vault."

"I was."

"How did you—"

"It's a long story, Purpled."

It's a long story.

That seemed to be their little "thing" now: stop asking questions, I won't answer you, I don't want to talk about it... It meant so many things.

Purpled didn't like that he could say that he had a little understanding with Dream now, something that normally only him and his brother had. No matter how hard it sounded, "Soldiers don't flee, Grayson, they fight" was his own little mantra, one of the rare and intimate things he shared with Punz. Sometimes, it was the only thing that still linked them as siblings.

Purpled didn't like the idea of having something like that with Dream of all people. First Wilbur, now Dream. He had a sneaking suspicion that it wouldn't end well.

Yet, he was smart enough to know that it was better to be on Dream's side than against him. He had to keep that place for as long as he needed to.

"I have to say..." Dream leaned backwards until he was lying down on the hard, rocky ground. Vulnerable. Purpled decided to copy him, still making sure to keep a good deal of distance between them. "I was worried at first. Punz spoke so highly of you and when I saw you after your revival, I was sorely disappointed."

The hunter almost apologized again, then stopped himself. Dream wasn't his general, or his friend, or his family. He didn't owe him anything. The Nightmare was nothing to him.

"But then you fought Wilbur, and it was like seeing a fabled legend leap out of the pages of a storybook and come to life. You were everything your brother said you were, and more."

The stars were nice from down here. Purpled had never cared much for them, but he did then, if only to try and keep his mouth shut.

"I've fought against kids before, and they've put up more of a fight than anyone I've ever faced off against. Children your age are so much more powerful than you think, and yet we can't stop underestimating you. You're a powerful ally, Purpled, and I can see that."

The air had shifted, and the hunter cautiously turned his head to the side. Dream was looking at him, again with no hostility or detectable, ulterior motives behind his expression.

"I can see you for what you are," the masked warrior continued, "and you deserve to go down in history. Stick with me, and you will."

"I don't like the spotlight," Purpled replied sharply.

"Ah, I see... You're not the first, and I don't blame you." Dream turned away again, and this time turned his gaze up above. "I missed the stars, back in prison. Do you know their stories?"

No, Purpled didn't, so Dream told him. He talked for hours, pointing at each constellation and each burning planet millions of miles away. He had tales and myths for each one, although Purpled found it impossible to tell which ones were common stories and which ones he had made up himself.

The hunter said nothing, and merely listened. He listened to the tales, he listened to the nocturnal ambiance of the mountains, and he listened to the faint music coming from the camp.

It was peaceful, and it was alright. Everything seemed to be alright, for once.

Maybe he didn't get all the answers he was looking for. Maybe he didn't trust Wilbur or Dream. Maybe there was something much darker hiding beneath it all, and yet Purpled couldn't see it.

But just because he couldn't see it didn't mean that it wasn't there. Something was off about Dream's charitable revival mission, and the army being trained and armed for who knows what reason.

Purpled didn't know all the facts and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it until he did – but gods, the moment he *did*, he was going to go down in history, and not in the way Dream undoubtedly wanted him to.

Chapter Seventy: Reprieve

The new era following the Egg's fall was marked by the ringing of wedding bells across Snowchester.

The chimes were loud and brilliant, dancing along with the sparkling snowflakes that twirled across the icy roads and cozy wooden homes. Those who wanted to hung garlands of pure white snowdrops and pine branches across their homes, brightening up the streets in the glorious morning sunlight. The lavish feast to be held that very afternoon was already being set up down in the harbour. No one remembered the last time something so wonderful had taken place.

It was a joyous day for many, and nerve-wracking for others.

In the church, Sam stood prim and proper in his shining, ceremonial armour, the soft white hermine cape around his shoulders and the ornamental crown on his head weighing just a little heavier than they ever had before.

He breathed in and out deeply, desperately trying to calm himself. It was alright, it was fine. Everything was going perfect, and he had nothing to worry about.

Somewhere near him, he could sense Technoblade and Philza, also made up for the occasion and occasionally catching his attention with bright smiles and satisfied hums.

Their antics had been going on for a while now – in fact ever since they had been chosen to assist as witnesses. Sam had decided to partially ignore them, their boisterous joy only growing the giddy nerves he had been trying to control all this time.

Opposite him, flanked by Nikki, Ranboo and Sapnap, Captain Puffy caught his eye. As radiant as ever in white, she gave him the sweetest smile. He resisted the temptation to rush up and kiss her then and there, and grounded himself once again. There would be plenty of time later. He could wait just a *bit* longer.

Instead, he turned his eyes to the altar. The priest was still talking, and everyone in the vicinity listened intently to what he had to say. They all knew it off by heart anyway, but there was always something magical about hearing those same, binding words in the moment, in action. The excitement in the air was palpable, and both sides of the petal-carpeted aisle and flower arch were practically bursting with well-meaning impatience.

And between them all knelt Antfrost and Velvet, finally tying the knot. A knot that evil and many years had attempted to pull apart, without success. It had all lead up to that one moment, and they were weeping with joy.

Antfrost's unfortunate demise at the Red Banquet thankfully hadn't left too much of a lasting impact on him. In a few days, he was up and about, and a week or so later, was carrying Velvet through the cobbled streets of Snowchester as petals and applause rained down upon them from the people.

His beloved Velvet, finally married to him. Together once again, for evermore. It was a dream come true, and the cat made sure to honour it every single day.

They spent their honeymoon in a little, vacant cabin on the outskirts of Snowchester. Ant had originally wanted to take his new husband somewhere else, but he had to admit that their options were limited – and all because of him and what the Egg had made him do.

The rest of the SMP wouldn't be too eager to forgive him, but for now that was alright. He spent the next couple of days thinking of nothing else but his husband and the life they could have. No Egg, no vines; just the dreams they had always had together.

"What do you want to do now?" the cat asked suddenly one morning as they lay in bed. The tundra morning was crisp and golden as always, casting its perfect and warm blanket over the immaculate sheets.

Velvet cuddled up to him and started to trace patterns down his furry chest with his index finger. "I don't know," he sighed, "bake, maybe, or go for round five?"

Antfrost choked at the implication, then nuzzled the top of his partner's head. "I mean in the long run. After the honeymoon."

"Be with and adore you until my final dying day?"

"But where?"

Velvet propped himself up, puzzled. "What do you mean, where? Here, in the SMP!"

"You don't want to go home?"

"You have a life here," his husband replied, leaning down to pepper kisses along his collarbone, "with friends, a nation, and a reputation. I can't ask you to leave it all behind."

Ant made a face. *Some reputation...* "And I can't ask you to stay here if you don't want to."

"Who said I didn't want to? Sure, there may be dangers, but I'll follow you wherever you go. Besides—" He kissed his nose briefly but sweetly. "—I've got a business venture with Nikki, so just you try and take me away from that!"

The cat cocked his ears in surprise. "Business venture?"

A business venture, a job opportunity. Velvet was a damn good baker and during the cat's recovery, he had met another talented cook, Nikki. She often came around to visit Puffy and bring some biscuits or little cakes for Antfrost. They had got talking, and found quite a few common interests that they were both equally eager to share with another, like-minded individual.

That was where their idea to open a joint bakery had originated from.

The whole SMP needed a little, joyous spark to lighten things up again, and so they gathered all the help they could to make it a reality – which consisted namely of giving Sam some convincing puppy-eyes and coercing him into looking after the renovations of a little, run-down place sitting on the border of the Greater SMP and the Badlands.

With Sam's expertise and architectural skills, their little business was up and running in only a few days, and they had already gained some traction. Their delicious, mouth-watering delights often sold out faster than they could make them, and they never complained. They liked the distracting thrill of it all; the flour-covered hands and counter, sugar crystals coating the corners of their lips as well as under their nails like gritty sand, and sticky icing lacing their hair after their day was done.

Occasionally, they got an extra helper or two, such as Captain Puffy who often stopped by to make an oven-load of cookies.

At first, Velvet had been wary of the sheep, especially after she had murdered his husband. But after talking to Sam, getting the full picture and spending time with her himself, he soon realized that his final judgment about her had been misplaced. His anger towards her bloody outburst, no, but his judgment of her overall character, yes.

Not only that, she got on exceptionally well with Nikki, and if the sweet, pink-haired sugar fairy trusted her, Velvet would as well.

One day – a particularly lazy one in fact, with a surprisingly light workload – they were all slumped across the counters and workspaces, idly eating a fresh tray of meringues and joking around. The door to the bakery was flung open. Two new customers walked in.

"We'll take any croissants you have left," said a gruff voice.

"And cupcakes too," added another, bright and smiling. "We heard that you guys bake the best!"

Immediately the two women snapped up to attention, soon followed by Velvet.

"My gods, Techno! Phil!" cried Nikki, happily leaping over the counter to greet them both.

They both laughed heartily. "In the flesh!" the piglin exclaimed, outstretching his arms.

"What are you doing here?" Puffy asked, just as surprised and delighted as everyone else was.

Philza beamed widely and shared a look with his friend. "Well, let's just say that something unexpected happened—"

"We got pardoned, baby!" Technoblade whooped again, punching the air and shaking the walls of the bakery with his neverending delight. "Outlaws no more!"

It was indeed a surprising outcome, but it seemed like Techno was much more open about it than Philza was. The avian simply stood back, his silent expression telling them everything.

Somehow, it seemed that all the nations had agreed on something, and that was to pardon the "villains" of the Antarctic Commune once and for all. All bounties and warrants were abolished, null and void, and instead of traitors, they were acclaimed as heroes.

No matter the reasons or technicalities, the prospect of them walking around as free men again was good news to everyone, and so they celebrated by sharing tea and stories outside, on a small table outside the bakery.

The weather was cool but not blustery, gently tousling their hair and wafting the sweet smells of the flowers towards them. They sat, ate, drank and talked together for a long time, and the afternoon they spent together was blissful.

That was, until a thundering tempest grew nearer and nearer, scaring the travellers on the paths and knocking just a few things over in their wake.

Two large, dark black horses with silver manes and mean little eyes reared up suddenly in front of the bakery. Their hooves were sharp and shining, close to stamping down on the tea party's defenseless forms. The beasts shook their muscled bodies from left to right. They were demons straight from hell.

Reins were yanked, words were yelled, and the two stallions were brought to a strained, impatient halt, snorting angrily and pawing the ground aggressively.

Antfrost took advantage of that opportunity to catch his breath, slumping across the neck of his steed. The horse shifted, threatening to buck him off. The cat gave Velvet a little shaking wave, who couldn't hold in his amusement and started to laugh.

"Techno! Phil!" cried the other of the two riders, twisting the reins tightly around his forearms. "Already enjoying that pardon, I see!"

"Of course, why wouldn't I?" the piglin replied, kicking his feet up onto the table and holding the little teacup between his big, heavy hands. He raised a toast to him. "Thanks for that."

"You've done so much for us all," Sam reminded him cheerfully, "it's the least we can give back."

"Yeah, thanks for giving us the chance to attend your funeral, mate," Philza teased, eyeing Sam's steed. The stallion he rode was undoubtedly the fiercest and the most brutal of the two. "What are you even doing with those monsters anyway?"

"One of the Badlands' farmers was busy rebuilding and had two stallions that needed breaking in," Antfrost replied, sitting up straight again and gathering his wits about him. "We offered up our services for the afternoon."

"Care for a ride, my darling?" Sam asked, offering Puffy his hand.

He looked and acted like a fairytale prince charming; brave, handsome and ready to sweep his love off her feet and ride off into the sunset with her. Anyone else would have probably leapt at the invitation, if only out of giggly, light-headed admiration.

Puffy, on the other hand, didn't move. She raised an eyebrow and scoffed. "And end up dying stupidly with you? No thanks, I'm good."

"What do you mean, 'stupidly'? It would be a beautiful way to go," Sam protested with a smirk. "A romantic tragedy!"

She crossed her hands in front of her chest and leaned back, but not before blowing him a teasing kiss. "You can take your poetic death-wish and shove it up your own stuck-up ass, honey."

Their quips themselves were sharp and teasing, but their locked gazes and gestures towards one another were nothing but adoring, and everyone noticed.

"So, am I the only one feeling severely left out?"

Techno's comment was duly noted by all the others, but it didn't seem to have caught the attention of the two love birds in question. Sam managed to calm his horse for a fleeting second, just long enough for him to lean down and kiss the back of Puffy's hand.

"Race you to Eret's castle and back," he challenged Antfrost.

"And cause a potential diplomatic strain?" The cat's ears perked up and he grinned. "Sure, why not!"

And with that they were off again, thundering down the Prime Path with the force of an entire army, their cries still loud and audible even when they had disappeared far over the hill.

Velvet sighed and poured himself another cup of tea. "I sometimes wonder how we manage to deal with them," he sighed.

"I do too," Puffy agreed. "Here's to our never ending patience."

"Here's to our love for them."

They clinked their teacups together and cracked a smile.

No matter how many despaired sighs they breathed out, or teasing remarks and complaints they let slip, they loved their partners – and they knew their adoration was completely requited.

Not only that, but they had complete faith in what Sam and Antfrost were doing, no matter how childish their antics could occasionally become. After all, the Badlands were thriving under their reinstated reign. That had to mean something.

That said, since Bad was villainized and on the run, settling themselves back into power wasn't as easy as it had first seemed.

For Sam, it definitely was. Acclaimed as a hero who rose from the dead to save the SMP from the Egg, the Badlands' people were more than eager to have him lead them once again.

Antfrost, on the other hand, caused a lot more controversy. Despite Sam's own public speeches in which he forgave him numerous times, the cat still received sideways looks of contempt wherever he walked.

Even the other leaders of the SMP were somewhat skeptical of the ex-leader of the Eggpire, and after Sam and Ant met with them all to simultaneously smooth out tensions and discuss the future, everyone thought it best if the people were left to decide who they wanted back.

Sam called for a plebiscite. It lasted for three days, and was deemed an international affair. Not only were the citizens of the Badlands called to participate, but so were those of the other nations. After all, the Eggpire had been a threat to all of them. It was only right that they would all have a say in the fate of the only member close enough to blame.

During that time, tensions were high. Antfrost and Velvet confined themselves to the White Mansion, and Sam temporarily retreated up North to Snowchester. All the gossip and murmurs for miles around were about the potential outcome of the vote, and with it, what would happen to the Badlands. There was no telling how it would be run, or if it would survive at all.

It seemed likely that the Badlands were doomed to crumble – just like L'Manberg, but a lot more silently. That was everyone's prime fear: history repeating itself again.

Whatever happened, Sam only wished that he wouldn't have to rule alone. He didn't trust himself to, not after his numerous fiascos regarding his management of Pandora's Vault.

Fortunately however, the outcome of the plebiscite was pleasantly surprising.

When the votes were finally counted, it turned out that *all* of the Badlands' people wanted Ant back, as did most of the other called-on citizens of surrounding nations. At first, it was a moment of elation and triumph for both Sam and Ant, but as they regained their senses, they soon began to wonder if the favour of their people was only an act of desperation, a final choice cast in the hopes of regaining some sort of stability again.

Even so, it was official and after so long, the White Mansion had regained its function as a proper, sane seat of power.

Eggpire banners were torn down, and were instead replaced with the Badlands', its blue trident and black and red background once more gracing the white walls of the hallways. The chaotic mess in the main living room was cleared up and the windows were thrown open for two whole days and nights. Things were brightening up, and Sam and Antfrost got to work.

Their first order of business was evaluating the land's situation. Farmland, forests and homes had been damaged or completely torn down by the Egg's vines, and the population had been reduced considerably – not because of deaths, but because so many citizens had been infected and had fled after the Red Banquet.

In fact, search patrols were at the top of the two leaders' to-do list. They wasted no time in gathering together small, armed battalions to search the unclaimed wilderness for any trace of Bad and the rest of the infected, and of course for Dream at the same time. Although the Nightmare hadn't been seen, there was no telling where he could be or what he could be planning at that very moment. As for Bad, the instructions were clear: bring him back alive.

Alive, because they needed to have a serious talk – and possibly a trial – with him, and alive because he was their dear friend. No matter what the Egg had made him do, they were still worried for him.

They just hoped that he was okay.

Then, they set about fixing up their land. They went out amongst their people and helped hoe and replant fields, clear fallen trees and crushed bracken, and even redesign and rebuild entire houses. The mines along the coast were reopened. Sam also donated most of his ores and riches stashed away in his mountain home to the cause, making sure to compensate workers for their sacrifices as well as boosting the nation's economy once again.

And, as a final, big gift to his nation, he single handedly negotiated and solved a long-standing, problematic and controversial demand.

He scheduled an audience with King Eret and met him for a short, somewhat informal walk in the Greater SMP's palace gardens. It was done so with smiles, courtesy and exemplary diplomatic reasoning and logic from both parties. The whole affair was wrapped up in less than an hour and by the end, Sam had managed to acquire half of

the land the Badlands had been trying to pull out of the Greater SMP for ages without success.

Half. It wasn't all of it, as Bad had perhaps originally wanted, but it was half nevertheless, and a whole new world of opportunities had opened up.

It was the coastline strip, now finally and fully under the Badlands' control. Plans were drawn up for a harbour and a branch out into maritime commerce.

Captain Puffy was solicited for her expertise with tides, trade deals and all things related. There was no denying that she was the best person they could have come to, and boy did Sam let her know it with ceaseless compliments and grateful gestures, from flowers to beaming, proud smiles to everyone in the vicinity that reminded both him and everyone else that he was the luckiest man alive.

Puffy had to admit, she had no idea what she was getting into when she willingly threw herself into helping govern the Badlands. It certainly wasn't being treated and perceived as a queen, that was for sure.

The Badlands wasn't a monarchy. It wasn't a republic either, nor a commune. It was simply headed by a group of friends who were duly accepted into the roles of leaders with no further questions or remarks.

An oligarchy of some sort would have been a better definition of the government's functioning, but *certainly* not a monarchy.

And yet, whenever she would go along with them to help set up foundations, renovate, or simply take a walk, the people seemed to revere her. They treated her with the utmost, even admiring respect – some even bowed!

It hadn't hit her why until she was sitting side by side with Sam, Antfrost and Velvet one afternoon, receiving simultaneous progress reports and demands from the people.

A queen. A devoted and respected peer of the ruling powers, sitting side by side with her partner and giving her own opinions on important political matters.

King Sam and Queen Puffy of the Badlands. King Antfrost and King Velvet.

It had a nice ring to it, or so the captain teasingly remarked later that day.

Although the power was indisputably shared equally between Sam and Antfrost, one leader was far more active than the other.

Sam was every inch a good, honest and determined ruler with a stern, logical and headstrong disposition when assuming his role. He was vocal with his concerns, suggestions and compliments. He was a born leader, no matter what he tried to deny or run away from.

Antfrost, however, had stayed a little further back. He knew that his position – and his head – was only saved by a thin thread that could be cut at any time. The plebiscite had been in his favour, but how long would those good graces stay? He followed Sam's ideals, and double checked with all his peers before even thinking of so much as suggesting something to his people. He was so much more cautious than before, so much more aware. Thank goodness he had Velvet beside him to keep him grounded and safe.

Nevertheless, they were both devoted to their land, and even more so nowadays in order to prevent previous mistakes from happening all over again.

There only still seemed to be one problem with the Badlands, and it was one that was, fortunately or unfortunately, kept within the walls of the White Mansion.

The place was so much airier and welcoming now it was being visited and worked in a lot more. The coldness of the halls and rooms during the Eggpire's reign had melted into a much more homely feeling.

Antfrost's room had been reclaimed once again, and Velvet finally moved out of his suite at the Big Innit Hotel. That was definitely for the best, considering that apparently Jack Manifold had finally realized who his latest customer really was and tried to charge him double.

Sam's designated room was starting to be used a little more often now too. It was the perfect place to crash when the day's work of rebuilding the Badlands completely drained him of his energy – or occasionally when cocky flirting would drag Puffy along with him to take care of some other important forms of "business".

And then there was Bad's room.

Decked out in red and black silks that reflected its old owner's tastes, it was cloaked in darkness most days. The curtains were drawn shut constantly, and the only sliver of light that ever cut through was the faint glimmer of a single candle and the crack under the door. The shadows within held nothing but sorrow, and even the red silks were far more grey than a bright crimson.

It was a curtained mausoleum, not a room, and the only living thing locked inside it was only barely alive. He refused to eat or see the sunlight, and they didn't even know if he slept at all. He simply sat there, holding the burning candle and waiting.

Waiting, and wasting away. No one could do anything to snap him out of it.

Skeppy had been found dead within the wrecks of the living room that had undoubtedly been torn apart by a tormented and crazed animal. It had been Bad's doing, or so King Eret had told them. He had gone insane and had killed him, then fled the scene when the search parties had stormed the Mansion.

Even with the Egg's influence as a possible reason, Sam, Ant and Puffy found it highly unlikely that Bad would do something so horrifying.

After all, everything he had done was for Skeppy – that was the only thing that had kept the demon in their somewhat good graces, even infected.

They had tried to ask Skeppy questions during his rest period, but he said nothing. He had simply lain there with wide eyes, silent. He had refused to answer, or so much as look at them. They had tried everything, and when that didn't work, ended up accepting defeat and were just happy that their friend was back.

Once Foolish had deemed him ready to leave the Temple Of The Undying's healing sanctuary, they had brought him back to the Badlands. Skeppy had immediately closed himself off in Bad's old room with nothing but a candle for company.

A diamond vigil, waiting quietly and patiently for... something. Perhaps a miracle.

Everytime his and Bad's fates were mentioned aloud, the White Mansion would fall into a tense hush, and progress momentarily slowed. More pain and grief was the last thing they needed, and Sam had been the first to snap under the pressure of the relapse.

"Screw it," he exclaimed suddenly one grey afternoon, rolling up a crumpled map and slamming it down onto the table, scaring everyone in the process. "May as well kill two birds with one stone. I'm going out."

"Out?" Velvet questioned, casting an anxious glance out of the window and at the sheets of rain hammering down against the glass. "Out where?"

"To the Vault," he replied with no further details and before anyone could stop him, he had retrieved the keys from his enderchest and stormed out into the downpour.

Puffy and Technoblade shared a look, and rushed out after him.

That day, Techno had been invited to the White Mansion for seemingly innocent reasons – nothing but a friendly chat with a friend. But when that talk soon devolved into questions about governing a nation properly, the piglin held out a hand to stop him.

"Sam, I'm an anarchist at heart, not a royal advisor."

"That's exactly why I need your counseling," his friend had replied. "You're an anarchist, you know when and how things go wrong."

"I'm still not one for politics. You're a smart guy, Sam: trust your own decisions. Sometimes, they're not even half bad."

Well, he was right about the "sometimes" part. Having Sam walk head-on back into the place of his death and strife was definitely not a good plan by any means.

"Sam, this is the worst decision you've ever made, minus the time you didn't wear your chest plate—"

"Samuel, you get back here this instant!"

Puffy's tone and demeanor was tough and scary and for once, Technoblade felt overshadowed. Yet even she didn't seem to faze the madman.

Sam kept on going, marching the three of them straight into the jaws of Pandora's Vault, left completely dormant for a few months now.

When Sam inserted the first key into the first lock, a gear was put back in place and the persona of the Warden whirred to life. Every movement was swift and mechanical like clockwork, and Sam once again started to navigate the portals like he had done all those times before. He knew them like the back of his hand.

Puffy and Technoblade couldn't do anything but dumbly follow behind him, watching him intently, ready to act if they had to snap him out of a frenzy.

Once they had set foot into the darkened lobby, however, Sam finally stuttered to a halt. He looked around the ever-so familiar room, and Techno could see all the memories, good and bad, rush back into him behind his eyes.

"Sam?"

Puffy held his arm, and Techno placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. Sam still stayed quiet a little longer.

"This would have been one heck of a casket if I did die here," he chuckled, the bitterness behind his joking oh so audible.

Neither of the two others laughed along with him, consumed by worry and their own terrifying memories of the prison.

"I sometimes find it hard to believe that you're the one who designed and built this," Techno couldn't stop himself from remarking. "The redstone, absolutely, but the darkness of it all..."

"It's not like you," Puffy finished for him. "This is nothing like you, Sam. The prison never has and never will define you."

There was an urgency in her tone that surprised Technoblade, and he noted how her hands on Sam's arm tightened. Most likely, she was fearing some sort of relapse and was struggling to pull him away from the edge that could bascule him back into the cold, recluse and aggressive Warden of Pandora's Vault.

"It doesn't define me," Sam agreed after a moment, nodding slowly, "but we can't exactly get rid of it just like that. It's indestructible."

And then, something seemed to hit him – a flash of enlightenment, or inspiration, or even madness. He shimmied himself out of Puffy and Technoblade's grasp and strode off, again leading them behind him.

Soon enough, he was speeding through the Vault, his fingers touching and fiddling with every surface. His eyes moved quickly, undoubtedly making up elaborate blueprints of some sort on the spot. The others could do nothing but go along with it and try to make sense of it all.

"We can't get rid of it, but we could repurpose it!"

He was smiling, occasionally running a hand through his green hair and mumbling to himself. He chuckled, and regularly turned to his companions for their approval.

Techno and Puffy were puzzled, absolutely and utterly confused.

"He's lost it, hasn't he?" Techno guessed in a hushed voice, and Puffy agreed with a sigh.

A flash of madness indeed, but not for long. What definitely seemed like insanity at first glance was in fact far from such when Sam took the time to detail his entire thought-process. It began to dawn on them.

They could turn Pandora's Vault into... something. Anything other than a big, scary prison.

Sam suggested a vault, just like the building's name originally implied. A strong, safe place to lock up anything of great importance – treasure, archives, food, anything worth preserving. Not only that, it could also help secure something else that was imperative to, and that was a long-standing peace treaty.

The Badlands wouldn't be the only ones to benefit from the Vault's new function. Sam called a meeting with all the other leaders and proposed the idea. They all accepted without hesitation and after numerous copies of all the keys were made and handed out to them, the nations started to breathe new life into the halls of the prison.

The Greater SMP moved their treasure trove, overflowing a number of the old rudimentary cells with iron, gold, diamonds and rubies as well as some important historical relics soon to be held in the museum currently under construction; Kinoko Kingdom stored some saplings and jars of spores, in case another fire happened to break out, and some ancient books deemed far too precious to leave in the library for everyone to see and grab; Las Nevadas contributed a few loads of redstone machinery and parts; and the Badlands began to regularly store whatever crops they could from their farms.

They even had the bright idea to use part of Pandora's Vault as a storage facility for overseas cargo, making the building plans for a harbour within their borders more necessary than ever.

Snowchester had nothing to stash away of importance, as the commune was pretty much self-sufficient and simplistic, and Techno flat-out refused to so much as look at the key he was offered.

Again, he felt like he was brushing a little too close to politics for his and the rest of the Antarctic Commune's liking. Although they trusted Sam, there was no telling what more government affairs could potentially provoke.

They had all trusted Wilbur too, once, and look what happened. Technoblade was done with government, but that didn't mean he was done with his friends or family.

Family.

It was still a strange word to him.

Family.

And what was even stranger was that he was the one that had decided to be part of one. He hadn't called himself "Uncle Techno" that one time for no reason. He had made a choice, and the consequences were only just starting to show.

He got to finally meet his niece and nephew.

He had absolutely no experience when it came to family life, but he was already surprised.

Michael, described as a cheeky and absolute menace by Ranboo, was one of the gentlest souls Techno had ever met. Their first meeting started with wide, awe-filled eyes, and then a big hug. Michael was treading on eggshells around Techno, as if he was meeting an idol for the first time. He was calm, collected and quietly but visibly passionate about the piglin's stories and tales. They spent many a day simply sitting by the fire and getting transported to faraway lands with only each other and their hot chocolate for company.

And then, there was Michelle. Sam and Puffy's perfect little angel: adorable, a bit shy, quiet most of the time – or so Technoblade had been told. Within the first ten minutes of meeting her, she was asking him endless strings of questions with her limited vocabulary, and Techno's head was already reeling. Michelle was decidedly a lot more excited and outgoing around her "uncle" than others, displaying no trace of fear, and the piglin found that endearing.

While Michael was happy to sit still for hours and listen to legends, Michelle was restless and made the perfect sparring partner. He tried to be gentle with her and go easy, but Michelle was clearly having none of it.

That first day, Techno was plagued with the first limp he had had in a while, and he finally took note of his growing age concealed by years worth of battles and wars. Even with wooden swords and Michelle's small size, one misplaced blow had him groaning, and he jokingly demanded the "perfect little angel's" horrified and excruciatingly apologetic parents for medical compensation.

Nevertheless, he found himself growing fonder and fonder of the two little piglins as time went on. He didn't really admit it aloud however – the voices were already teasing enough.

That said, his true feelings were noticed by Ranboo. The way his face and tone would lighten up whenever one or both of the little piglins would pay them a visit was almost magical. The hybrid made sure to immortalize every instance in his memory book once his wrist had healed properly.

It could be used as friendly blackmail someday.

Ranboo was... doing fine for himself. Since the Red Banquet and the Antarctic Commune's collective pardon, the hybrid could move around freely once again with no fear of being shunned or reprimanded. Things became normal again, and when once he was the center of unwanted attention, he felt like he was fading into the background again.

That was alright by him; the backseats gave him a lot of freedom.

He started to spend a good few days of his time in Snowchester, rebuilding two bonds that had cracked and frayed with his whole social exile fiasco.

As they had promised, Tubbo and Michael welcomed him back with open arms, and Ranboo eased himself back into his caring, parental role again. It felt nice, like a warm, familiar armchair he could just sink into and bask in.

He got to see and love the strapping bundle of joy that was his son, and for a while those moments were the only memories that stuck longer than a day or two. Michael, his son by blood or not, and everything they did together. Things that his mind deemed worthy hanging on to. He was proud of Michael, and he loved him like a father would and should.

And of course, Tubbo's presence made the whole scene just as joyous and familiar as it had always been. The young ram, the best friend the hybrid owed so much to, seemed better than ever. Happier, more open, and more responsible. He finally started to head Snowchester as he had originally wanted to, the whole story of it being a "commune" revealed to be nothing more than just that – a story. An excuse to let go of governing for a bit while he wasn't in the right mindset.

Finally, after being concealed behind long bangs and nervous smiles, a glimpse of L'Manberg's President Tubbo was left to shine. The ram had at last learned the errors of

both himself and his predecessors, and vowed to lead his new nation with as much goodwill and diligence as he could.

Ranboo was proud of his little family, and he made sure everyone knew it. He slipped mentions of his son and platonic husband into every conversation, dragged them both out in public for walks or political business, if only to bask in the cooing and compliments they received on the daily.

It wasn't arrogance, nor a form of boasting. Ranboo had simply gained an extraordinary amount of confidence and he was making the most of it while it lasted.

There was only perhaps one other family that could steal his spotlight on the occasion that they crossed paths, and that was when one of the leaders of the Badlands came to visit. In all honesty, he practically lived in Snowchester now. It didn't make much sense considering his important political position across the sea, but no one really asked any questions.

After all, everyone knew that many people would do anything for love.

What *did* people do for love?

Stupid and risky things, Puffy was inclined to say. She was, of course, basing it all on her own experiences.

For love, she had left her family and home without a goodbye, abandoned her own lamb, continued to dig an already growing trench between her and another after a flaming betrayal, and – for the *pièce de résistance* – had kissed her closest friend in a fit of panic and had risked breaking them apart forever.

Only one of those sacrifices had paid off, and part of her was certain that it was merely *luck*.

She was *lucky* to have Sam, to have him as in-love with her as he was, to have him forgive her on the spot for any mistakes. To have him be sincere, kind, gentle, genuine. To have *him*.

With Nikki, everything felt like a fleeting dream, one that had slipped away when she had finally woken up to the booming sounds of L'Manberg's fall.

It had been the same thing with Schlatt – a dream, at first. It had soon devolved into a nightmare.

With Sam, it simply felt down to earth and real, even if she was in pure bliss. It was grounded and rooted. It was stable, and in a world she had learned held so many uncertainties, it was soothing.

Sam had been her friend for a long time now, and maybe that was what had planted the roots. Instead of love at first sight, their relationship had blossomed from love at second sight, or maybe third, or fourth, or fifth, or even more. They worked towards it through trial and error on their own paths. Now they were here, at the end of their separate ways, everything was finally cemented into place.

Some would perhaps say that they moved too fast – they would have simply called it moving forward, together.

Caring, close friends to deeply adoring lovers. The bridge separating the two had finally been crossed.

It wasn't a question of more love in any way. Just as Nikki had said on the night of the Red Banquet, it was a different kind of love. Still as strong, but simply *different*.

With the Badlands once again rising from the Egg's ashes, Sam was busy, yet he still always found time for her and Michelle.

He had become a father again after only a couple of days – the unsure, perhaps even reluctant man who had saved the little piglin from the Nether was now beyond devoted to her. At first, he had asked Puffy a lot of questions, if only to avoid screwing up monumentally but soon, like Ranboo had, he had leaned into the role with ease, as if it had always been made for him.

And it had been – somewhere along the line, Puffy was sure of it.

His pure, utter adoration and acceptance was only confirmed when one day, Sam referred to Michelle as "our daughter" in front of Puffy. To say that she was overjoyed would have been a gross understatement.

Sam finally accepting his role was a huge step and, at last, Puffy could relax and enjoy their life together.

Sam, ever well-meaning and gallant, insisted that he take her out on a few, traditional dates when he could. Nothing special, just an evening walk or dinner that always ended with them wrapped up in each other's embraces under the stars.

The captain soon realized that he was highly nervous most of the time and when she finally asked him why, he replied; "I told you, I never had a chance to properly live a romance with someone. I'm just trying to do it right."

In other words, he was trying his best because he was scared that she would change her mind about them, or that he'd end up being nothing but a brief infatuation, a fling. It took a long and loving night for her to assure him that she would do nothing of the sort.

She had loved him dearly when he had been her charming, wonderful friend outside of her home, and seeing him in a far more domestic setting didn't change anything. In fact, it only made her more certain of her choice.

Moving in together was a learning experience for both of them.

Perhaps Sam had never *properly* had a romantic relationship, as he had said himself, but Puffy also knew for a fact that he was also new to living and being in such intimate proximity with an animal hybrid.

In her case, a sheep hybrid. Every animal had their own quirks, but it was clear that Sam was still new to rams, and ewes like her. He never shied away – not even once – when her occasional instincts took control of her, no matter how strange and sudden they turned out to be.

They were things like headbutting him regularly to show affection, purring loudly like a cat when she was content, and even keening painfully through a particularly violent heat that hit and she ran out of herbal suppressants. For the last one, Sam happily and lovingly helped her through it with no qualms, even after she subjected him to a particularly moody and agitated build-up to the fact.

After swallowing crushed up herbs most of her life to suppress it, she was relieved and beyond thankful for a sweet, caring partner to act as a healthy outlet for her heat. He didn't stare in disgust or fling more suppressants at her feet to calm her down because he couldn't "take that complicated shit right now", as a certain ram had once put it.

Sam was nothing like that. Throughout the whole ordeal, he was always so patient and gentle, giving her whatever she wanted and taking care of her diligently, no matter how demanding, snappish or needy her instincts pushed her to be. She could be exhausted, clingy, and even look like and give him hell if she wanted to and he'd probably still kiss her, cuddle her, tell her how beautiful she was, help her stay hydrated and offer to make her something to eat.

For that alone she was forever in his debt and would adore him for the rest of Time.

In turn, Puffy had never really had any romantic contact outside the boundaries of her own species. Not many rams or ewes did anyways. Part of that was usually due to sheep-hybrids' bad reputation for their fierce heats and tugging urges that scared others away, and a known fact that sheep families were exceptionally strict on mating partners, wishing to keep their lineage as pure as possible.

She wondered if her family would approve of Sam or not, something she found herself doing that a lot as she eased into her own family life. She snickered at the thought of turning up at their door one day on the arm of a creeper hybrid and with their piglin daughter in tow. Her father would certainly have a heart-attack.

Then, she remembered that she hadn't seen her family since she was fifteen. Eighteen years later and counting with no contact, she had no idea if they were even still alive. They didn't know about Tubbo, nor her success as a sea captain. They would probably never know what happened to their little lamb. The thought made her sad.

Either way, she had never truly got to experience a creeper hybrid first hand, even if Sam was decidedly more human than monster. He felt comfortable enough to tell her about that stupid little morphing potion he had drunk in his younger years, the one that had changed parts of his body for the rest of his life, answering a lot of indiscreet questions she had and was too polite to voice aloud.

The gunpowder musk was one of the first things she had noticed when she first met him, always lingering in the air around him like a cloud of perfume and heightening when strong emotions hit. She didn't mind it – in fact, it was something that she loved about him. There was something about the metallic, even sulphuric tang that was somewhat addictive, and the imprints it left on her lips, clothes and home were more than welcome.

With the gunpowder came the explosions too, or at least the build ups to them. Sam reassured her that he didn't have the inside attributes to detonate, but that didn't mean that the gradual hisses didn't make her jump on the occasion. Again, they were heightened by strong emotions. Puffy eventually got used to them, especially when he was holding her against him and whispering sweet nothings into her ears, and started to realize what Sam meant by the fact that his heart was ready to explode in her presence.

Then, there was the way his pupils moved. It was definitely not entirely human, but even so, it didn't scare her. In all honesty, the way his pupils would blow out when he was content was adorable. When he was passive, his eyes would darken a little. It was clearly

not out of sorrow or dread, however, but rather made him look infinitely relaxed and when he smiled. When looking at her or their daughter, they were nothing but warm and adoring.

Puffy also started picking up on Sam's little homely habits, good and bad.

He liked to add seemingly insignificant ingredients while cooking that made everything delicious. He tinkered around with whatever little mechanical wonder he could find in order to keep his hands busy and his mind sharp. He frequently hummed little unknown tunes and would sometimes pull her into messy, gentle slow dances in front of the fireplace. Nothing like their waltz at the Red Banquet – a memory of that night that wouldn't leave either of them alone, for the better – but still just as gentle and loving.

And then there was their little morning routine. She would fall asleep and wake up warm and safe in his arms. It was the safety and companionship she had been missing and craving for years. That alone was enough to put a smile on her face, making the day to come a good one.

"Hey," she'd whisper when he'd open his eyes.

Sam would smile at her, still groggy with sleep. He'd echo back a soft "Hey" as well, then lean in and kiss her good morning.

But of course, every so often, there were little hiccups that made Puffy roll her eyes. Things like leaving mug stains on the table, or forgetting to pull the bed covers back correctly or to restock the kindling.

Small things that she teasingly confronted him about one day.

"I could list off a few things about you too, darling."

Puffy crossed her arms. "But it's my house."

"And *our* relationship. You snore."

"Only when I have a cold," she pouted, desperately trying to hide her smile. "You let the dog's hair get everywhere."

"You're one to talk, Miss Woolly Sheep. Not to mention the fact that you don't wipe your hooves when you come inside and trek snow and mud everywhere."

"You fold the corners of pages instead of using bookmarks."

"You're the one who *loses* the bookmarks."

"Okay, wise guy, explain this one away: you always think you're so smart and have a comeback for everything."

"And you're too bossy for your own good. Be careful, that might come and bite you in the butt one day..."

Puffy hadn't realized that she had been backed up against the kitchen counter until she was very much aware of Sam towering over her with a sly glint in his eyes.

That cocky motherf—

"Well?"

She raised an eyebrow, and sighed. "Touché," she mumbled, then yanked him down by his shoulders and kissed him.

In the end, not everything was perfect, but it was safe and loving, and it was theirs.

There was only perhaps one obstacle that could have brought it all crashing down. One small, little detail they had overlooked before letting their romance become public knowledge. One person, one ram, who just happened to be Puffy's own son.

Fortunately, things seemed to be going easy in that department as well.

"So, my mum's seeing someone now," Tubbo said to Tommy one day as they walked through one of the familiar forests on the mainland.

"Really?" Tommy replied with a whistle. "Damn, that must be hard..."

Tubbo shrugged. "Actually, it's pretty chill. I thought it'd be weird because it's a politically strange relationship, but then we kind of just, I dunno, managed to work it out and bond. He's a good guy and makes my mum happy, so that's all that really matters in the end."

"As long as you're cool with it, but please tell me you've threatened to cut off his balls if everything goes to shit."

"Don't worry, Bossman, I'm way ahead of you! I think he got the message. I'm not worried though. He's trying his best, and she really loves him."

Tommy would be lying if he didn't suddenly want to wring this mysterious lover's neck. Sure, Puffy may have been happy with whoever they were, but in a way, the boy felt betrayed.

Puffy and Sam were the only adults that had been there for him. Puffy and Sam, Sam and Puffy.

He absolutely hated the idea of having someone else enter the equation – Tommy despised maths anyway. It was like getting a step-dad, someone he didn't know and that could never replace the first one.

Of course, Tommy had heard rumours, but he had brushed them aside swiftly. He was used to people making up fantastical stories about the deceased coming back to help them in times of need, but this was reality. There were no convenient phantoms or angels to swoop in and save the day, not since Dream's escape and subsequent disappearance with the revival knowledge.

Sam was dead. Tommy was fairly certain of that.

He and Tubbo kept walking, venturing deeper and deeper into the woods until they came across the treehouse. From Tubbo's startled reaction, it was obvious that he hadn't expected it to seem so... inhabited.

In the midst of the period of reprieve following the Red Banquet, there was of course one question that lingered on everyone's minds: what of Tommy?

Well, very unlike himself, Tommy had decided to fade away. After the fireworks were done and the masquerade refugees had been safely escorted back to their homes, he bid goodnight to Tubbo and disappeared.

He didn't want to be thanked or talked to, and he didn't want to go back to his home. Instead, he had escaped to the forest. Even though the treehouse itself was left alone and never continued, Tommy often went there to sit and think. It was peaceful and calm, and the forest sounds and sights provided the perfect, mind-numbing distractions for both him and Sam Nook.

The raccoon had diligently stayed by his side all this time. Tommy wondered if he'd ever leave one day, and then realized that it was fruitless to imagine such a thing. Sam had charged Nook with looking out for the boy no matter what. He would be loyal to the very end, and even beyond. Tommy could work with that.

Soon enough, his few brief visits to the clearing became entire day trips, and those day trips soon turned into nights as well. Tommy brought along a few tools and supplies, and turned the crudely-built den into something a little more worthy, something that could withstand the elements and that could potentially become a decent home.

The truth was that Tommy was happy in the treehouse, and he wanted to stay where he was happy and felt safe. No one else knew of its existence.

Today, however, he wasn't really in that joyful and calm mindset. He was on edge and deeply troubled, which was why he had gone to fetch Tubbo. He needed supportive reinforcements.

Sam Nook ran up to greet them and hopped onto Tommy's shoulder. Then, the three of them clambered up into the treehouse itself and settled down.

There were a lot more blankets since the last time Tubbo had been there, and the holes in the walls and roof had been patched up. The only light source came from a glassless window and a small jar of fireflies Tommy had spent an evening collecting out of pure boredom.

Once they had settled down, Tommy pulled out a ragged piece of paper with torn edges and dog-eared corners. The creases were deep from where he folded and unfolded it over and over again. He handed it to Tubbo.

The ram frowned and took it. "What's this?"

"Someone slipped it under my door," said Tommy, and that was all he was willing to say.

"Who?"

"I don't know, but look." He pointed at the couple of inked lines. "Do you recognize the writing?"

Tubbo squinted and held the note up to the fireflies. Before long, his narrowed eyes widened, and he froze. His gaze was glued to the paper in his hands, and he was silent. Tommy had expected that. After a long time, Tubbo took a breath and folded it up again, handing it over without a second look. His hand was shaking a little.

"Someone's playing a joke on you, Tommy," he said, his tone serious, and unfamiliar.

That had been Tommy's first thought as well "But what if it's real?"

"It can't be. He's dead."

"Yeah, no shit. I just thought you should know about it." He pocketed the paper again. "I think I need to talk to Puffy."

"Why?"

"It may sound dumb, but I think I need her advice."

"*You* need advice?" Tubbo chuckled. "Gods, you really have changed haven't you?"

Tommy forced himself to smile, but then awkwardly let his hand drift down to his pocket. Any moment, the note could suddenly leap up and bite him. It wouldn't – because it was a piece of paper – but its mere existence had already ripped a chunk out of Tommy's laid-back attitude that had only just started coming back to him.

He knew that Tubbo was right. Logically, the supposed sender was dead, and someone was just joking around with him. But as much as the boy knew that, he couldn't shake the darkness that it brought along. If it was a joke, it was a deeply insensitive one, and whoever had done it was sick. He definitely needed some sort of guidance either way.

"Yeah," Tommy nodded confidently, making up his mind, "I'll go see Puffy."

That was a good idea.

"Tommy, this is a terrible idea," said Ranboo.

The boy spun around to face him. "What was that?"

The hybrid sighed and turned his collar up against the soft snowfall. "I said that this is a terrible idea," he reiterated.

"I second that," Tubbo suddenly added.

Again, Tommy turned to face them. Ranboo flinched when faced with his piercing stare, and he immediately backed off.

Tommy had reluctantly decided to include Ranboo in his schemes once again after Tubbo's persuasive insistence, and was making an effort to rebuild what previous events

had shattered. Even so, the hybrid knew that he was on extremely thin ice that seemed to crack at every word or misplaced look.

Although he had found confidence, for this specific case he had decided to reel it back a little.

Tommy huffed out a cloud of warm air and tapped his foot on the frozen cobbles.
"What's a terrible idea?"

"Wanting to go and see Puffy."

"*You* encouraged me, Tubbo!"

"Yeah, to talk to her, not to barge into her home!"

"Why not?"

Ranboo and Tubbo shared a look. They knew why, and they had made a solemn pact to not say anything about it to Tommy. Everyone knew about Sam's return, but Tommy never gave any sign that he did. Even if he was, he never talked about it and for a boy who let his mouth run faster than his mind, that was saying a lot.

They couldn't say anything. They just had to somehow work their way around the problem without acting too suspiciously.

"We could ask her to meet you out here," Ranboo suggested.

"Fuck no! It's freezing here and I want some hot chocolate. Puffy's is the best."

The hybrid had to admit that Tommy had a compelling point. Even so, they couldn't give up, and he turned to Tubbo for support.

"We could go to mine," the ram suggested. "Puffy could make it there—"

"Is this about whoever she's seeing?"

"In a way, yes, but—"

"Well fuck him! I think someone needs to show him what a real man looks like!"

And he strode off, just like that, heading swiftly towards the house and windmill at the top of the hill. Tubbo and Ranboo exchanged another look.

"Let's just hope the Badlands blew up or something and he's unavailable," Tubbo muttered.

Ranboo nodded eagerly, then stopped and dropped his hopeful act. "Everything's going to go badly, isn't it," he guessed.

After a deep sigh, the ram set off after his friend. "Oh yeah, we're fucked, Ranboo."

Ranboo's pointed ears twitched. He didn't like the sound of *that*.

Chapter Seventy-One: Nothing I Can Say

It was a quiet, simple afternoon.

Snowchester was wrapped up in the gentle, lazy blanket of a soft snowfall. Few sounds could be heard, the only loud disturbances coming from the young children that found delight in slipping and sliding on the icy roads, or zooming down the hills on makeshift sleds of their own creation. Even the sea was still and well-behaved, stretched out across the way like a roll of bright blue silk.

Puffy stood at the window and watched the few passing boats sail across the horizon, their hulls and masts nothing more than dark shadows against the sky. Snowflakes tumbled past the glass, toying with the faraway shadows and greeting the captain in passing.

Everything was calm.

"Papa! Look!"

Puffy drew her eyes away from the ocean and tilted her head towards the table. Michelle was eagerly jumping up and down in her seat and pulling on the sleeve of Sam's hoodie.

He turned his head from the scattered papers he was writing on and put down his pen, his full attention visibly on the piglin.

She turned back to the redstone system laid out in front of her.

Michelle, the ever curious little thing she was, had pleaded with her father to teach her everything he knew about the magic of the glowing red ore. Of course, "everything he knew" was in fact seven years worth of intense academic training and despite being a Grand Master, teaching it all to a child was something that he had openly admitted to Puffy that he was not proficient at. She couldn't blame him.

He had, however, decided to start small and simple. Thankfully, setting down something as easy as a small light system was enough to keep Michelle entertained for a few hours, at least.

But the particular feat of engineering in front of her was a little different to the simple mechanisms that Puffy herself could just about wrap her head around. It was still made from the small kit Sam had made her for Christmas, but already, Puffy had to blink twice before even attempting to understand it.

Michelle flipped a tiny lever. A light lit up. It activated a little mechanical piston machine, sticky with slime and honey, which crawled a couple of inches across the table before stopping completely. It wasn't as impressive as some things Puffy had seen, but it was a darn lot more than the captain could ever achieve herself.

The wide smile that lit up Sam's face was nothing less than one full of strong, genuine pride and he clapped.

"Beautiful work, princess," he praised, reaching over and ruffling her head. She arched into his touch like a blooming flower, letting out a joyful little grunt. "You're so smart."

Fran ambled up to her master and sat down heavily by his side, lifting one paw up onto his leg. She began to whine enviously.

"Yes, alright, you're my princess too, Fran, don't rub it in." He reached down and scratched her behind her ears.

The silver-pelted "princess" huffed, her head held high and proud. She lay down and buried her muzzle between her front paws. Her tail was wagging.

"And what about me, Your Majesty?" Puffy asked, finally speaking up and sauntering towards him. She smirked and took a place behind Sam's chair, casting a side-eyed glance at his hound. "Or am I somehow beneath the dog?"

Sam tilted his head back, giving her a raised eyebrow and a grin. "Is someone jealous of Princess Fran?" he taunted. "She was the first proper lady in my life, you know!"

"Just answer the question, Sam, or I'll start to think it's true."

He took her small hand and held it between his large palms, his thumb running up and down the length of her fingers.

"You, my gorgeous," he began, "are my smart, beautiful, wonderful, kind, brave and fierce queen."

He very likely could go on and on and seemed about to, punctuating each of his words with a soft kiss to the back of her hand.

She laughed after the tenth one and tried to pull away. "Alright, alright, I get it."

"Oh no, you don't get to go fishing for compliments and then complain how many you catch."

Sam gave the back of her hand a few more pecks, then finally let her go. Even so, she liked the attention and in an attempt to get it, draped her arms over his shoulders and his chest. Everything about him was soft and homely, and she momentarily closed her eyes, basking in it.

Sam also relaxed in the last few weeks, putting his feet up and taking breaks more frequently without feeling paranoid or guilty. He had also seemingly allowed himself to dress more comfortably when he wasn't needed on official business, swapping out tight and heavy battle-wear for looser garments made of soft material. It made him a very comfortable place to crash on and take a nap, as Puffy could very much attest to.

Big, warm and cuddly, like a pillow.

She felt him shift and, with her curiosity getting the better of her, she rested her head in the crook of his neck and took a little peek at the work laid out on the table in front of him.

"How are the harbour plans coming along?" she asked.

"They're coming along."

He leaned back and spread the sheets across the table so Puffy could see them properly. There were about four large ones depicting full, scaled down diagrams and maps of the Badlands' coastline, crammed full of annotations and the inked foundations of numerous buildings. She could make out the piers and the docks as well as rows of new houses, but the sheer amount of notes, measurements and other scrawls she couldn't

comprehend hurt her brain. It was a different language, an indecipherable code to her. She decided it was best to just stick to what she knew.

"You need a shallow bay somewhere," she remarked, tracing a sizable semi-circle on one of the larger drawn-on maps with her index finger.

"Why?"

"Where else are the boats going to be built, silly?" she tutted, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Not out in the raging ocean, that's for sure, and dragging everything from a mainland workshop would be more work than it's worth."

"I didn't think of that..."

Sam grabbed his pencil and quickly sketched out a new space to be dug into one of the cliff faces. It was quick and messy compared to all the other well-drawn lines, but it got the message across either way and he seemed satisfied with it.

He sat back and sighed, smiling up at her. "Gods, what would I do without you?"

"Kill sailors and craftsmen alike, I think," Puffy hummed, playfully pulling the hood of his dark green sweatshirt over his eyes and making her escape.

Almost immediately, she heard him drop his pencil and rush after her, abandoning his work. A moment later, she was hoisted high up into the air and she shrieked.

"You really think you can just pull that stunt and get away with it?" Sam chuckled, one arm around her back and the other under her legs, carrying her as if she weighed no lighter than a feather.

She wondered if the lift was simply an act of him showing off his strength, and she rolled her eyes. Cocky bastard. A partner combined with the strength he was blessed with had somehow turned him into Herakles, and he was very obviously proud enough to show it off on the regular.

She could either humour him and give him the praise he wanted, or she could tease him a while longer. She decided on the latter. His ego could hold on just a little longer before being satiated.

"Yeah," she replied, sticking out her tongue, "and I'll do it again."

"I'd like to see you try."

"You would, wouldn't you."

She pulled his hood once again over his head and then, in order to seal her victory, she kissed him on the cheek, proving once again that Sam was a weak, weak man when it came to her charms.

"One day, those sweet little kisses won't be able to save you," he warned with a hum, giving her one of his own before setting her down on the floor again.

"But until then, they do, so I'm going to make the most of it."

"Be my guest! It'll only make my own victories sweeter."

"So you're admitting that I won then?"

Sam paused and thought for a moment, his confidence waning. "No, that's not what I... *Hey!*"

His utter indignation at being tricked made her laugh loudly, and she only played it up more when she caught him gazing at her adoringly.

"I love hearing you so happy."

His tone – gentle and mellow – brightened up his expression to no end, and hers as well.

"So do I," she replied.

At that moment, something small and hyper leapt onto Sam's back from a nearby chair, and he yelped in surprise.

"Up, up, up!" Michelle chanted, and with a chuckle, Sam obeyed and lifted her high off the ground.

"One of these days, you're going to break my back," he sighed as the piglin lovingly reached up and pressed her snout against his nose.

Fran had also decided to join them, her tail wagging furiously and barking playfully at Michelle, who was currently reveling in her position of power and superiority.

"In fact, I'm certain that all *three* of you lovely ladies will be the final death of me."

Puffy could live like this forever. She could spend the rest of her days in a paradise where she was safe, loved, and had everything she ever wanted. Having Sam with his arm around her as he did and Michelle on his hip with her little hands reaching down to pet her woolly curls was perhaps one of the first times she could finally and fully believe that her life could be normal again – as normal as she had ever allowed herself to imagine it could be, that is.

There was a knock at the door, and the daydream ended abruptly.

Puffy pried herself from Sam's grasp with a groan and a sigh. "I'll get it."

"I could—"

"No, I'll do it." She reached up and stroked his cheek. "You just take care of Michelle."

He softly kissed her palm and nodded, then went towards the fireplace where Fran was yapping at his ankles. Puffy watched the three of them in harmony for a moment or two more, then went her separate way as well.

She opened the door. It was a usual sight, at first glance; just Tubbo and Ranboo paying a regular, daytime visit. It was only when she saw their sullen expressions and noted the third person accompanying them that she was well and truly taken aback.

"Hi Puffy," said Tommy, "can we come in?"

She didn't give an answer and only snapped back into reality when she felt him push past her into her home.

"We tried to stop him," Tubbo said and him and Ranboo filed in behind their friend.

"Stop him? Why?"

Then it hit her, and she realized what a bad idea it was. Her blood ran cold, and all traces of her dreams of eternal happiness vanished into thin air.

Immediately turning around, she reached out to stop the newcomer. "Tommy, wait—"

It was too late.

The blond boy had stopped in his tracks. His head was stock still and turned to the room stretching out in front of him, to the ghost that stood within it. The phantom who had

nonchalantly turned his head to the newcomers simply out of polite curiosity was now just as frozen as everyone else was. No one breathed, no one moved.

Sam looked absolutely terrified.

Tommy was unreadable.

"*Sam?*"

The man's name came out like a frozen arrow; short, sharp, cold. Demanding an answer, an explanation of some sort, and above all, shaken.

Sam gently put Michelle down and straightened his posture, likely in an effort to compose himself. He opened and closed his mouth a few times before answering.

"Tommy..."

Another long silence followed. Again, everyone was still. No one spoke a word, and all eyes were focused on the boy and the man.

The quiet was only briefly broken by a small, sweet voice.

"Momma?" Michelle whispered, tugging at the captain's legs. She sounded nervous and kept looking back at her father.

Everyone seemed to know that a storm was brewing. No one wanted to be the flash of lightning or rumble of thunder to kick it into action – and Puffy would certainly be it if any of them dared catch her young daughter in the crossfire.

She ushered Michelle away. "Everything's alright, sweetie," she whispered, plastering a reassuring smile on her face. "We just need to be alone for a bit."

"Uh, yeah... Just for a bit..." Sam agreed, his voice shaking. He hadn't drawn his eyes away from Tommy. Tommy hadn't drawn his eyes away from him either. "Everything's fine, princess, I promise."

They clearly weren't fooling anyone, least of all their own daughter. Michelle lingered a moment more, until her mother gave her a soft but insistent stare. She nodded silently and scampered away, giving Tubbo a little greeting and briefly hugging Ranboo's leg as she passed. The door to her room closed.

That was at least one potential casualty safely out of the way.

"Boys," Puffy said, turning her attention back to the unexpected visitors, "would you like to take a seat?"

Tubbo and Ranboo nodded politely but eagerly and pulled some seats for themselves near the fire. Tommy stayed standing, and the captain wasn't going to push him to do anything.

Sam on the other hand, she would. He looked like he was about to keel over, and she ambled up to his side.

"You too, Sam," she murmured, gently guiding him backwards and into an armchair.

She was met with no resistance, and no look her way. She sat beside him on the armrest and held his hand. She squeezed his fingers, letting him know that she was by his side.

He squeezed her hand back, a silent but strong sign that part of him was still there, and that he felt her.

Things were about to take a difficult turn.

An obvious trench had been dug, dividing both sides of the room. The no-man's-land between them was mostly empty, save for Fran.

The dog plodded back and forth, unsure whether she should stick loyally by her master's side or comfort the boy who was very much on the verge of a breakdown. In the end, she sat down smack bang in the middle with a heavy sigh, her head flitting from one to the other anxiously.

Outside, the tundra wind had picked up, rattling the glass panes and throwing around the snowflakes. The fire crackled, as did the tension between them all. Tubbo's hooves began to nervously tap against the wooden floor, and Ranboo's long tail snaked around his leg to offer some form of comfort. Sam's breathing was eerily still but when Puffy discreetly checked his pulse, she found that his heart was racing.

Again, no one said anything for a long time, simply staring at each other, waiting for someone to make the first move.

That someone ended up being Tommy.

"Why the *fuck* are you here?"

Everyone's attention shifted to Sam. He remained completely silent. His hand clenched tighter around the captain's. He was trembling lightly. Either he was terrified, or he was as close to breaking down as the boy was.

Tommy was the first to draw his gaze away, looking behind him to his two friends and eyeing them with an appalled glare. "You fucking knew about this, didn't you?!" he yelled at them. "You fucking knew!"

"Tommy—"

"Don't you dare try to excuse shit!" he snapped at Tubbo. "You fucking knew and you didn't tell me! You didn't... you didn't..."

He stumbled over his words and his feet, catching himself on the edge of the mantle. Puffy resisted the urge to run up and steady him herself. She knew that he would reject her help immediately.

"Can you blame us?" Ranboo jumped in. "We didn't know how you'd react!"

Tommy turned back to him, snarling. "Oh yeah, because how I'm reacting right now is so much more preferable than what could have been if you thought of giving me a fucking chance!"

"We tried to—"

"You didn't try shit!"

He turned back to Sam and Puffy. Almost immediately, his snappish attitude faltered, and all the captain could see in his eyes was pure and utter fear. A haunting so deep she was sure she had never seen one like it before.

"How are you here...?" he stuttered, shaking his head. At that moment, all his attention was focused on Sam. That's all his world was. "How...? I... I killed you..."

Sam jolted upright in his seat. "Tommy, nothing was your fault. Have... have you been beating yourself up this whole time?" His guilt and deep affection was leaking from everywhere – his gaze, his movements, his voice. He dropped Puffy's hand and made a move to stand. "Tommy, no—"

"Stay the fuck away from me."

Tommy was pale, too pale for his own good. He lifted his hands to his temples and held his head. He swayed unsteadily from side to side. Even his breathing was shaking.

"You could have shown your face any time, and you didn't..." Like Sam, Tommy's emotions were rushing out from his entire being. His pain, and his ultimate fear. "You left me alone, again... Why didn't you come to see me? You could have just left me a sign that you were alive... *anything*... anything at all..." He dared to raise his gaze ever so slightly. "Why didn't you?"

Sam didn't answer and let his head fall. He seemed just as broken as Tommy was, and he couldn't reply. Everyone's eyes were on him, and everyone was awaiting an answer – everyone except the captain. Peer pressure was a terrible thing and no matter how much she cared for Tommy and was just about reduced to tears by his vulnerability, she loved Sam.

Puffy let her hand drift to his shoulder and began to rub comforting circles with her thumb. He leaned into her and she kissed the top of his head before she finally filled the silence, "We all wanted to say something, but—"

"Why didn't you, Sam?"

"It wasn't as easy as—" Puffy tried again, and was cut off a second later.

Tommy glared directly at her. "I believe I was talking to Sam."

Gods, she had never heard him sound so cold and spiteful. It made her shut up immediately and back off.

She thought that was it, and Tommy would go back on his heartbroken ramble, but oh no, far from it. If anything, her interruptions seemed to have made him furious, and enraged enough to go feral.

"Why didn't you fucking do it, Sam?!"

His broken tone hardened into something vicious, poisoned words and anger spitting out from his mouth with every scream.

"I thought you were dead and all this time you've been living the high life, balls deep in a new bitch!"

In one motion, everyone bristled and snapped up in utter horror.

"Tommy!" Tubbo and Ranboo gasped in unison.

Puffy stood up suddenly, a sharp, uncomfortable feeling twisting in her gut. She could feel her face heat up, and she tried to brush the embarrassment away by channeling her emotions into a form of sharp discipline. "Tommy, that's enough!"

A hand found hers again, and Sam sat her back down. "Let him get it all out."

His voice was calm and even, relaxed in contrast to everyone else's shock. It only seemed to make Tommy angrier.

"You fucking chose to abandon me for something better, didn't you?!" he continued to yell. "That's all any of you know how to do! That's all anyone does!"

Now everyone was undeniably being targeted, and they all knew it. Tubbo and Ranboo stood up and shifted awkwardly, debating on whether they should leave or stay. Fran also leapt to her feet, barking softly and whining.

Puffy gritted her teeth and shot up again from her seat – this time, Sam didn't stop her. "Tommy, I said that's *enough*!"

It was one thing having Tommy be rightfully angry, but have him take it all out on her own son, who had only tried to help him? On Ranboo, who was shaking and starting to frantically scribble in his memory book?

No.

Not in front of her.

She wanted to beckon Tubbo and Ranboo towards her. Anything to keep them out of the firing range.

"Tommy, how could you say that?" Finally, Sam got up and stood to his full, towering height. "How could you say we don't care for you? I sacrificed everything and more just to bring you back! Because of it, Dream escaped and I almost lost Puffy!"

"*I never asked you to revive me!*" Tommy shrieked back, clenching his fists. "If this is the world I was coming back to, I would have preferred to stay dead!"

"We both know full well that's not true, Tommy. Your limbo wasn't as festive as you made it sound. I could see it in your eyes."

"Bullshit."

"I think you'll find it's not. I know, Tommy, and I wish I could have done something sooner."

The boy pursed his lips, but he said nothing. His gaze lingered on the ground.

"Sam, you should have just told him you survived."

That was a mistake. Immediately, Puffy shut her mouth and Sam spun around to face her.

"You agreed with me, Puffy!" he exclaimed, aghast. "You agreed that it was for the best!"

She cowered, her heart aching. "I know, but..."

Somehow, she had single handedly made everything so much worse. She cared for Tommy like a son, but she loved Sam, but even then her motherly duties had taken over, but she loved and trusted Sam, and *gods*—

"Yeah, you should have, Sam!" Tubbo suddenly piped up, hands on his hips. "Tommy's right, it would have made everything so much easier! We should have told him!"

"And risk him reacting badly?" Ranboo jumped in to defend Sam. "Yeah, great idea, Tubbo!"

"Well, he reacted badly anyway! We should have just said something so it didn't have to go like this! He could have mulled over his emotions privately, but instead it was sprung on him and now we're all caught up in this mess!"

"Well if you were so sure, why didn't you tell him yourself?!"

"Puffy," Sam said over the voices of the two others. He sounded hurt, very hurt. "We talked over this, and you *agreed* with me!"

That was it.

"*Enough!*" Puffy finally yelled, holding up her hands for silence, which she got. Sweet, sweet silence. "I'm sick of this!"

She stared down each of them in turn, daring any one of them to break the quiet. None of them moved. Good.

She had settled mutinies on her ships before. She knew how to deal with rowdy sailors drunk on rum and greed. However, the discourse she found herself in the middle of was a little different, because it was an argument between her family.

Maybe that's what made it so hard to settle easily, and so she took matters into her own hands and spoke sternly.

"Sam."

"Darling, I..."

She stepped away from his outstretched hand. As much as arguing with him hurt her too, now was not the time for any sweet talking or affection.

"We should have told Tommy," she continued. "He should have had a right to know. We shouldn't have been the ones to decide for him. He had a choice, but we didn't give it to him."

"We agreed—"

"And it was a mistake. We should have manned up and faced him sooner. He had a choice, Sam, and I think we both know how much we hate when parents try to control our emotions and decisions for us, don't we?"

It was a direct hit. Sam knew exactly what she was talking about, and he looked away. Her heart heaved at the thought of having dug up the unwanted memories of his past and hurting him, but it had been the only way she had to get him to understand. She would make it up to him long and hard, she promised herself. They couldn't lose each other again.

She turned away from him, back to Tommy. He must have felt her stare on him, as he looked up. Again, he was unreadable, and Puffy knew she had to approach him carefully.

She was a captain, but he was still just a kid.

"Now, Tommy..."

"Puffy—"

"I'm talking," she reprimanded with all the softness she could muster. He closed his mouth and looked down again. She continued. "You have the right to be angry, and you

have every right to make it known. However, I don't appreciate the way you're talking to me or my son, and you've scared poor Ranboo half to death."

The boy looked behind him. Ranboo perked up and straightened his back, but his violent shaking was still just as obvious. Remorse painted its dark cloud over Tommy's face, and a mumble sounding awfully like an apology escaped his lips.

Progress. It was progress, and Puffy allowed herself a small sigh of relief. "And Sam's right; he sacrificed so much for you. I was sceptical at first too about bringing you back, I didn't know if you'd want to be revived. I pleaded with him, it tore us apart, but he went and did it anyway. He did it because he loves you Tommy, and he wanted to give you another chance to live. You're both just as stubborn as each other. He would give you the universe if you asked for it. We all would."

She followed his eyes as they landed on Sam. The man had turned back to the conversation at hand and no longer angry or agitated, he watched the boy with all the pure, honest sincerity in his being – Puffy could tell and so, most likely, could Tommy.

Tommy looked away a moment later, and the captain could see his eyes glistening. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "I thought I killed you... I thought you were dead because of me... Ever since the siege, that's all I've been thinking about..."

The siege of Pandora's Vault was so far away at that point, even if six months seemed like nothing. Now, a day or two off hitting the New Year, Puffy truly realized how great Tommy's guilt must have been.

Blaming himself incessantly for half a year for a permanent death that had never happened, and that was never his fault in the first place. No child should ever have had to go through that.

Tommy inhaled a deep breath, replacing his trembling pout with a spiteful scowl. He dug his hand into his trouser pocket and took out a folded piece of paper.

He held it up for all to see and glared at Sam. "Is this a fucking joke, huh? Are you the insensitive prick who sent this?"

"N... No, I didn't send anything..." Sam exchanged a confused look with Puffy, and looked back at the note.

Tommy threw it to the floor. "Read it, and then decide if you love me enough to do something about it."

He gave Puffy and Sam one last death stare and stormed out of the cabin, pushing past Ranboo and Tubbo as he went. The door slammed violently behind him, and they could just barely hear the sounds of crunching footsteps head down the snowdrifts and away.

A tense moment passed and Tubbo came to his senses. "I'll see if he's okay," he said, then hesitated. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, Sam. It was just in the heat of the moment, and Tommy..."

Sam gave him a smile. "It's alright, Tubbo. It's alright."

The ram smiled back, then rushed off after Tommy. The door also slammed behind him, violently shaking the walls of the cabin. At this point, it was a miracle it was still standing.

Where there once were six, there were now four.

"Could I sit down?" Ranboo timidly asked, eyeing one of the chairs with wide, vacant eyes.

Puffy was appalled that he ever thought he had to ask. "Of course, please do."

The hybrid took a seat and huddled up on himself, holding his head in his hands. He was clearly in no state for another confrontation with Tommy, or anyone for that matter. The captain began to wonder if he'd even be able to walk home that day.

"I'm sorry," another voice whispered, and she turned to Sam. He looked very much in the same state as Ranboo was. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled at you or Tommy, I should have said something sooner, I should... I should have..."

Puffy immediately rushed up to him and gave him a tight hug, burying her face in his chest. "I'm sorry too," she whispered, just as guilt-ridden as he must have been. She let her body relax when a gentle hand tangled in her curls and pulled her closer to him – the mark of forgiveness.

There was still one thing however that still hung over them all, and that was Tommy.

Something soft nudged Puffy's shin. Fran was looking up at her with anxious eyes, her wet nose and the piece of paper Tommy had thrown between her teeth.

Puffy carefully took it from her and with Sam's arms still around her, unfolded it and read what it said.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day.

It's been a while, hasn't it, Tommy? It seems just like yesterday when we fought for our freedom together, side by side. I miss those days, we should catch up.

With a dawning era soon upon us, I feel like it'll be the perfect time for us to speak once again, face to face. I'm sure you'll have plenty of stories to tell me, will you not?

I will wait for you in L'Manberg, on the twelfth bell chime of New Year's Eve.

It'll be just like old times. You and me, together. Totally alone.

It wasn't signed. Still just as puzzled, Puffy silently handed it over to Sam and waited for his verdict. She lay her head against his chest again, drifting off to the gentle beating of his heart against her ear. It was soothing, and momentarily, she could forget the previous turmoil.

All of a sudden, Sam breath hitched, snapping her back to the puzzling note at hand.

"This sounds too suspicious to be anything good," he muttered, moving away and starting to pace in front of the fire. "Ranboo? What do you make of this?"

The hybrid perked up at the sound of his name and took a look at the note Sam was holding out in front of him. At first, his mismatched eyes just seemed to skim it, but soon after he furrowed his brow and took it from the man's hands.

Then, he said something no one ever expected him to say.

"I remember."

"You... what?"

"I remember something like this. It looks familiar... I recognize the writing."

The hybrid handed the paper back to Puffy, who took a good, closer and longer look. Sam joined her.

The writing was small and compact, arranged in orderly, close-knit lines. The penmanship itself certainly didn't belong on a crappy, crumbling scrap of parchment, but rather on royal decrees or in the heavy leather bound volumes of the finest literature, or even in the journal of a poet. Not writing eerie and vaguely threatening messages to a young boy.

"Well?" Sam probed, looking once more at Ranboo.

"I found a stack of letters in Phil's house one day," the hybrid continued. "I think they were written by the same person who..."

He trailed off, and his certainty faded into wide-eyed fear. His reaction, combined with the mention of Philza and letters, gave the captain a very good idea about what he was thinking. It was nothing good, and most importantly, it was downright impossible.

It *should* have been downright impossible, but now doubts were starting to creep in.

"Ranboo, what are you insinuating?" she asked him warily. When he didn't answer, her suspicions were only confirmed. "Who were the letters from?"

He didn't answer.

"Ranboo, please."

"I don't want to—"

"*Ranboo.*"

"Wilbur," he finally spat out. "They were from Wilbur."

No one spoke for a long time, and only looks were passed between them. Even their breaths had stilled.

"That's impossible, Ranboo," Sam eventually murmured. "Wilbur's dead."

"I'm just telling you what I remember," the hybrid replied, starting to tug at the fur on his tail and his locks of hair.

Sam was visibly agitated, and there was no way he could have ever hidden that – least of all from Puffy, who could read him like a book. He took the note from Ranboo and cast it into the fireplace. The flames swallowed it whole and burned it down to ashes. Out of sight, out of mind.

Puffy watched as Sam's shoulders rolled back and he let out a sigh, then stood up straight and shook his head.

"Tommy's right," he said, "someone must be playing a joke on him. Wilbur can't have written this, he's dead. We've seen his ghost."

They had, but as soon as he mentioned the friendly little phantom, Puffy's stomach sank to the deepest depths of her being.

Ghostbur.

"Ghostbur hasn't been seen for months."

That one line, that one random bit of passing gossip that she had forgotten up until then was all it took to confirm everyone's worst fears.

"Are you saying that Wilbur could be back?"

She wished she could have mustered up the courage to lie to him. "I... I don't know, but with Dream free..."

"Wilbur and Dream, working together?" Sam shook his head again, a lot more quickly and sharply. Puffy had a sneaking suspicion that it was more to banish unwanted thoughts than to actually disagree with what she was saying. "That would never happen, they've always been enemies."

"I don't know," the captain replied, still utterly clueless, "it's just a theory. But if it is a trap of some sort, why would someone wait until now to kill or harm Tommy? Why now?"

"And *who*?" Ranboo added. "Who and why?"

"There's only one way to find out," Sam said after a pause.

He looked towards the door and Puffy's gaze followed him, landing on his trident.

"Sam, no."

"Tommy said he wanted me to do something after reading that note, to show I truly care about him. I'm not going to let him face whoever it is alone."

Chapter Seventy-Two: Once Brothers

It took a lot to calm Tommy down after the unexpected encounter.

A lot, as in Tubbo couldn't do it without fighting fire with fire, therefore resorting to harshly reprimanding Tommy with shouts when his soft words didn't do the trick. It worked, unfortunately enough, and the boy's fury and frustration soon turned into a pained silence.

"I'm sorry," Tubbo had apologized, "but that's the only thing that seems to work with you."

Tommy didn't resent him for that. It was a nice wake-up call. He just quietly gave him a hug and sent him away, wanting to spend some silent, melancholic time alone in the treehouse.

He deserved it, in the end. He deserved Tubbo's harsh words, as well as Puffy's frustration. He also deserved to lash out and get angry at them. He deserved a voice, for gods' sake! But he felt like he *didn't* deserve Sam's affection; not after he almost killed him, not after he threatened to fill his brain full of lead – and yet it was somehow still very much there. The boy had seen it in his eyes.

The public talk Tommy had been trying to block out all this time had all proven to be true. He'd brush the Badlands' borders and hear things such as "Sam's repurposing the Vault" or "Sam said he'll deal with it after he's signed the agreement". Things that had brought vivid images of the bloodied trident in Dream's hand and the ocean of self-loathing crashing back down over his head.

He just never expected any of them to turn out to be true.

Sam was alive, somehow. Tommy had no idea how: had his death been faked? Had he been saved? Had he been... revived? Or were they all simply going insane with a shared grief... He had no clue, he just knew what he had seen as soon as he had entered Puffy's house.

Sam was living, breathing and very much startled to see him.

At first, the boy had thought he was seeing a ghost – it wasn't a particularly unusual sight for him. He had even been one himself. He soon realized that it was far from the case.

Sam was solid. He had no scars, no pearly eyes, no scent of funeral flowers or marks of death anywhere on him. He was just there, as he had always been.

The expression that had been on his face, the one Tommy had first mistaken for fear had been in fact – he realized as the minutes in Snowchester ticked on – a subdued fit of excitement. Sam had been happy, albeit nervous, to see him again after so long.

Even after everything, Sam had been happy to see him.

And what had Tommy done?

He yelled at him, cursed him, insulted him, and found himself blaming him for everything. He had let twisted, thorny vines of spite shoot out and grab him by the throat. He had found himself wishing that Sam had died back in the prison, so many months ago.

It would have made everything so much easier.

It was a horrible and shocking thought, but one that had wormed itself into his mind nonetheless. The wound that his guilt had left was so close to start healing – *so close!* – but that one, single meeting had torn it wide open once again. He was healing, and Sam... *Sam...* Sam just had to meddle with it, once again!

Why couldn't Sam ever leave him alone?!

"Because I don't want to be alone," Tommy finally confessed to the crude safety of his hideaway. "I don't, and he knows that."

He didn't want to be alone. He just wanted... something. A stable family, or even just a friend group. A loving surrounding which didn't have members that went insane after being kicked out of power, stabbed their own sons, or teamed with his biggest enemy to blow an entire nation down to bedrock.

Sam had a sixth sense, it seemed, and he had known what he wanted. He had tried to provide it and in true Tommy fashion, the boy had reacted badly or selfishly. He wanted it, but it was too unfamiliar to bear, no matter how much *he needed it*.

Instead, he lashed out with insults, arguments and fits of jealousy, even towards his best friends and their new life, the one that was so much better than his own.

Sam had tried to help him, Sam emphasized with him, Sam cared about him...

Sam cared about him, and yet Tommy still somehow doubted it.

He doubted it enough to go as far as guilt-trip him into proving it, with no ultimatum. A note, a stupid note with stupid writing undoubtedly written by a stupid prankster.

Tommy had gambled all his affections on a grown, smart man believing the contents of a fake-looking letter delivered by a child.

That's what he kept telling himself, anyway.

A fake letter, that's all it was. A sickening joke. And yet, it still deeply troubled the boy.

If Sam was somehow alive, could that mean... Could it possibly mean that Wilbur...?

Well...

It was not impossible, that was for sure, but still highly unlikely.

Tommy groaned and flopped down on, half of the blankets and half on the hard wooden planks.

His head was hurting, and his movements were sluggish and heavy, weighed down by his remorse and exhaustion.

He lay there for a long time. He didn't know how long, until he heard the clock of Church Prime chime ten in the evening, two days later.

New Year.

Two days later.

Those two, lazy days of doing nothing had allowed him to think, and finally decide what he was going to do. He pushed himself up from the floor.

Nook was still fast asleep. Tommy didn't have the heart, nor the will, to wake him up.

He took the journey slowly, with a hood pulled over his head for maximum secrecy. He definitely needed it.

The Prime Path was alight with night life on the eve of the New Year. Children darted across the roads with sparklers, weaving between stalls serving hot drinks and pies. The whole Greater SMP seemed to be out on the streets, celebrating in harmony. He saw a few families together, as well as boisterous groups of friends and giddy lovers eagerly awaiting midnight to finally get the real festivities going.

Everyone had someone, and Tommy was alone, chasing a potential phantom to the ends of the land.

What was he thinking? Sam wouldn't come. If Tommy hadn't been mistaken, he had a family now, and was most likely spending the final hours with them. It would only be natural, and normal.

He kept going. The closer he got to the L'Manberg path, the fewer crowds there were, until they had disappeared entirely.

The deserted moore that was once his nation – his pride, his joy, his home – was dark and silent. Even the nocturnal animals had escaped it. It was a sea of dark blue shadows, like moonlit depths of the darkest oceans.

Tommy was on his own, and he was already close to drowning.

He approached the edge of the crater, his head reeling from the dizzying height. The flag was hanging sadly from its mast at the bottom, with no wind to perk it up.

The boy couldn't help but whisper down into the hole. His voice bounced off the walls and echoed eerily, but at least he wasn't so alone anymore.

"I know you're dead," he said, coaxing the bittersweet collections of coloured stripes and crosses to look up at him even for a second, "but happy early New Year."

The flag continued to hang limply. It didn't stir in the slightest, and Tommy sighed. He made a move to crouch down and dangle his legs over the chasm.

"Tommy, be careful. It's a long way down."

Tommy froze, startled. He almost lost his footing, but not quite, and turned his head. Someone was walking towards him, a cloak slung around his shoulders and a sharp trident harnessed to his back.

He had come. He had really come.

Sam grew nearer, and the boy could just make out his smile in the dark. "Hey," he said, beckoning Tommy away from the ledge. "It's a long way down."

It didn't matter anymore. Sam was here. He had made a decision, and he was here. *Sam cared about him.*

"You're pale." A hand reached out to touch him and in an abrupt movement that surprised them both, Tommy moved away.

He didn't want to be touched, not yet. If Sam in fact wasn't real, if his hand was merely a vacuous mass of otherworldly ectoplasm, then Tommy was so close to throwing himself off the precipice and joining the flag at the bottom, forever.

"I'm fine, it's just cold," he lied through his teeth.

"Oh, do you want me to—"

"No."

"Alright."

Seven sentences in and Tommy hadn't screwed up yet. Neither had the caring adult with him. That was a new record. He just had to make sure he held it.

"So," Sam began, looking around them, "any sign of this trickster?"

Tommy noted the edge in his voice and shivered. He thought he was the only crazy one, but knowing he wasn't didn't reassure him in the slightest. "I don't know, it's too dark."

"Here."

Sam took something out of his cloak and held it towards Tommy. It was square and mechanical, complicated looking to the uninitiated—he didn't know why he was surprised. Sam was an engineering freak.

"What's this?" he asked.

Sam wordlessly leaned over and flipped a small switch, and the lantern lit up.

"It's not much," he said, "but it's better than nothing."

Tommy held it up high and got a better look around them. The moorland was silent and bleak, its diverse array of colours all painted dull in the night.

Nothing, no one.

"There's no one here," Tommy said.

"It's not midnight yet," Sam reminded him. Then, his gaze turned serious. "Tommy, if Wilbur wanted to meet you somewhere, where would he go?"

The boy's previous fears only returned when the bluntness of Sam's question hit him. It was undisputed confirmation that they shared their suspicions, no matter how outrageous they may seem. It would certainly explain Sam's unexpected arrival to join Tommy in his nightmare.

He thought for a moment. With the whole of L'Manberg gone, only one, semi-intact place sprung to mind.

"The button room," he said, his gut twisting at the mere mention. "It would be in the button room."

The button room, the place where the detonation on November 16th was planned, wired and executed, was unfortunately – and ironically – perhaps one of the last structures of L'Manberg that had survived Doomsday.

It was strange to see such a solitary pile of stone and rubble off to the side, far enough from the rest of the surrounding ruins to be easily brushed off as another crumbling house, yet too close to the crater to mean nothing at all.

It was probably the most fear-inducing landmark of L'Manberg's glory days, and no one ever willingly approached it anymore. It was a place that marked the beginning of a decline, the end, where Wilbur Soot was stabbed and where Tommy's life had started to crumble.

That's where Wilbur would want to meet him. The boy was sure of it.

He led the way, scaring himself with every nearing step. He didn't really know who or what they'd find there, but Tommy dearly hoped that it was something other than unwanted memories.

The twelfth hour hadn't struck yet.

The cliff it had been dug into had been completely blown apart, but some of the walls and part of the ceiling itself had survived. The front and back of the room had been reduced to rubble, a simple, overhanging rocky ledge that arched overhead framing the view of what once had been a smoking – but repairable – carnage. The two other walls, although mostly intact, had also been crumbling, held up only by large boulders littered either side.

Tommy took a few steps inside and sucked in a heavy breath. The weight of the history and suffering this single room bore was crushing, and cut off his air. He tried to desperately avoid looking at the dark red splatter on the dusty floor that marked the exact spot where... where...

"Tommy, sit."

He felt faint.

He did so without much of a fight, setting the redstone lantern down beside him. Sam crouched down next to him with a rustle of soft clothing. He wasn't wearing any armour.

In a way, it was reassuring. It meant he didn't think the potential encounter would be dangerous enough to have to fight. Then again, if things did get nasty, then there was a strong chance of him getting injured.

Tommy wouldn't be able to face Sam getting hurt again because of him.

The boy focused on the lantern and the way it lit up the rocky wall in front of them. The stone shone a golden, fiery orange, cut through with small, shadowed ridges, veins on an old hand that had seen far too much.

Out of the corner of his eye, something black tore through the light and he flinched. He stared back at the wall with wide eyes.

A dog appeared, silently opening and closing its mouth a few times and watching Tommy with a gleaming little eye. Then, it turned into a spider and its eight long legs, followed soon after by a bird with large, feathered wings that spread over the entirety of the wall.

Tommy's face broke into a long needed smile. He snorted and gently shoved the man next to him, hoping he would take it as it was meant – teasing and light-hearted.

The bird dissolved back into a hand, and Sam chuckled, withdrawing his shadows from in front of the lamp. The rocky wall once again became nothing but a bright, veiny canvas.

"It's nice to hear you laugh," Sam said, "I missed it."

Tommy fell quiet again. He could feel Sam's eyes on him, but he didn't dare cross his gaze. Instead, he changed the subject.

"I don't like this place," he admitted out loud.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. I don't either."

Tommy forgot that Sam had been there too on that dreadful day. At the time, he meant nothing to the boy, and was only cemented in his brain as a chill guy who made a couple of redstone cannons for the Pogtopia revolutionaries.

Times had indeed changed since then. They had changed for the better, and Tommy wanted to keep it that way.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, hiding his head in his knees.

"Sorry for what?"

"For everything."

He wasn't going to elaborate. He didn't need to. Sam was smart, he'd figure it out immediately.

"Why would you be sorry? You did nothing wrong."

He was smart, but he was a liar. Why was he lying to him?

Maybe it was for the same reason Tommy was apologizing, maybe he wanted to keep what once was a nice and happy friendship—

Who are you kidding, Tommy? He's always acted as more than a friend and you know that.

He knew that, but he didn't want to believe it. It would hurt too much if it turned out not to be true.

He also expected Sam to try and hug him, and had to admit that he was sorely disappointed when he stayed put. Then, the boy remembered why, and once again, it had been his own fault.

He couldn't go back in time and take back his sharp reaction, but he could at least try and make things better. And even if Sam didn't want his excuses, then tough. Tommy would make him sit through them anyway.

"I've been shitty towards you, and I'm sorry."

He wished he could go on, but that single sentence summed up everything in a nice little package. He couldn't do any better.

All of a sudden, Sam spoke up.

"I've been shitty with you too, Tommy, more than shit, even. Nothing I can say will ever make that right. I should have been honest with everything. I mean, you're just a ki—" He stopped himself. "—still young, and even though I know you're old enough to handle these things, I forget that. By wanting to protect you my own way, I've only pushed you into more danger, and you were right to be angry at me for that. I left you when I shouldn't have, and I was too scared to make amends when I could. I came today because I wanted to try and do the right thing, for once."

Tommy couldn't believe his ears.

"I just want you to know that I'm proud of you," Sam continued, this time looking straight at the boy. His eyes were glistening and in the golden lantern light. Tommy thought he could see a couple of tears. "Even when you attacked the Vault, you brought nations together and proved that they could work together in harmony. You created a form of nationwide peace between those who might have been enemies. You did that. You, Tommy. You're remarkable, and you deserve everything good this world has to offer. I'm sorry I was too much of a coward to help give it to you."

Tommy *couldn't* believe his ears!

Peace. That was definitely not the word on his mind when he had leapt onto that cafe table all those months ago.

"And you were right about Dream. We should have just killed him when we had the chance. I didn't trust you about that, and we all paid the price. I'm the one who needs to apologize for everything."

Tommy couldn't believe—

"Will you ever forgive me?"

Yes. On the spot, he was ready to let all bygones be bygones and leap into his arms. He didn't care about the past. He well and truly had Sam back.

But he decided to play it cool, and Tommy being Tommy, he shrugged. "Sure."

The bright and surprised light that flashed across Sam's eyes was one that was hard to miss, but visibly wasn't meant to be seen by the boy. Trying and failing to hide his smile, he nodded and feigned indifference.

"Cool," he hummed, "that's cool, Tommy."

He then curled his hand into a fist and offered it to Tommy. Groaning internally, the boy realized that Sam was incredibly out of touch with the trendy greetings of Tommy's generation. Nevertheless, he decided to humour him and gave him the awaited fist bump.

No matter how cringe-worthy it was, it was nice, and he allowed himself another smile.

That's where their conversation ended. It was short, but everything was said just as it had to be, right then, and it had concluded with a form of mutual forgiveness. That was something Tommy wasn't too accustomed to.

It was nice to have Sam back.

A faraway bell chime resounded through the air.

One.

All thoughts and feelings left his body, and Tommy's blood ran colder than the tundra glaciers. He was yanked back into the real, awful world they were in, and everything rushed back at once.

The note.

"Sam, hide!"

From what, from who, Tommy didn't know, but he knew he was about to find out. He could feel it in his bones. The air had shifted, and every one of his hairs stood on edge.

Two.

Three.

"Hide behind the rocks," he pleaded, still shoving and pushing Sam as hard as he could. He skidded against the floor and almost fell over.

"Tommy—"

"Please, Sam!"

"I'm not leaving you alone again!"

And I don't want you to get hurt.

Four.

Five.

"Please..." He shoved him with all his might, and he was growing tired, too tired to think straight anymore. "Just go, please!"

"I'll still be right here Tommy," Sam whispered, defeated. "You're not going into this alone."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He slunk off into the shadows.

Six.

Seven.

Tommy tried to compose himself. He took deep breaths. They didn't help. His heart was still thumping uncomfortably in his chest, threatening to tear its way out of his ribcage.

Eight.

Nine.

He closed his eyes. He wasn't ready for this, whatever it was.

Ten.

He put his hand on his own shoulder, and gripped it tight.

Eleven.

He tried to imagine it was heavier than it was, more caring and gentle than Tommy could ever pretend to be. He tried to pretend it was Sam's.

Twelve.

"Happy New Year."

He opened his eyes and looked around. Everything was dark, and a chill had taken hold of the previously mellow air. The redstone lamp had switched itself off, somehow, and the golden walls were now coated with the dark, lugubre silver of the moonlight.

Everything was as it was, except for one small apparition. A tall, lean shadow shrouded in a long brown coat, unmoving.

Tommy was paralyzed down to his very core, turning to cold, crumbling stone just like the kind that made up the vestiges of the button room.

There, on the red spot that had marked a tragic death, stood a full resurrection. It turned around with a painfully familiar, lopsided smirk.

"Hello Tommy," Wilbur said with a chuckle. "Did you miss me?"

Fireworks boomed in the distance, and the sky was illuminated with shimmering, multicolored stars.

There was nothing to celebrate.

Tommy would hate the New Year for the rest of his life.

"Come here, it's been so long!" Wilbur Soot marched towards the boy with big, purposeful strides, his arms outstretched. He scooped the boy up into a tight hug.

Tommy couldn't move. He wanted to move, to fight back, to scream, to run, but his body simply wouldn't respond. It left him stuck there against his will, face shoved into

the bright blue sheep's fleece around the other's shoulders—a fleece he realized with horror was none other than the final remains of Friend. His nose was buried in the hide of the dead, in more ways than one.

Wilbur felt solid, real. He was real, and he was alive. He was *alive*, and somehow that thought was the most terrifying part of it all.

The note, the fear, the waking nightmares. Everything was because of Wilbur, and now he was here, in the button room, to do it all over again.

"You've grown a bit," Wilbur said, taking a step back and slinging an arm around the boy's shoulders. He turned them both to a cloaked figure that had just arrived. "Hasn't he, Dream?"

Tommy wanted to run far, far away, to and off the edge of the world, but his captor's grip was too strong.

The cloaked figure threw off his hood and surveyed the boy from head to toe with disdain. His mask was off, and not a single trace of a smile or even a smirk crossed his expression.

Tommy had hoped dearly that he would never see him again, but deep down he knew that Dream would never simply pack up and hide forever. He was set on destroying and avenging whatever suited him. He would never go quietly unless Death somehow managed to grab hold of him in his sleep.

Even that was a stretch.

And Dream was here.

Dream was *here*.

And then he suddenly wanted to claw his eyes out, stab him, scratch him until both their bodies bled dry.

Dream had killed Sam.

Dream had tried to *kill* Sam.

Forget the wars, the chaos, the massacres, all the other blood that stained his mask. For that one sin alone, for daring to touch Sam and take him away from Tommy, he

deserved to burn forever. Tommy would gleefully snatch up the honour to carry out the execution himself.

"Was this your first attempt?"

Wilbur's hand roughly grabbed his face and turned it up to his own. Tommy could see so much more now; his muddy brown eyes, the crow's feet wrinkles in the corners dug by years of warfare and stress, and his glowing complexion. Tommy hated the torment that raged inside of him, indecisive to whether he downright despised or deeply missed any of it at all.

"Yes." Dream's answer was curt and dry, like a cracking twig.

"My goodness, it's incredible. You definitely have a talent," Wilbur duly complimented, admiring the boy like one would a priceless artwork. "Tommy, look at you! So radiant now you're alive. Death didn't do you any favors in limbo, now did it? Have you thanked your saviour yet?"

"I would rather die."

His first words.

He finally found his voice and his senses, and pushed himself out of Wilbur's clammy grasp. He retreated a few steps back, eyes flitting from one villain to the other. He desperately tried to calm his terrified little heart again, so close to panicking and beating itself to death.

Dream's hand hovered over the sword by his side, threatening to make quick and good use of it.

Wilbur, as far as the boy could see, had nothing but the clothes he wore and his spectacles. He didn't need any blades; his words could be just as sharp and deadly.

"Easy there," Wilbur began, his careful and deliberate drawl coating his voice with sticky honey. "What's gotten into you?"

"You're fucking alive, you dick!" Tommy yelled, unable to find a cleverer answer. When battling tongues with Wilbur, there was a very slim chance that anyone else would come out the victor but him.

"Tommy, that's no way to talk to your big brother, now is it?"

"Wilbur, he didn't come alone," Dream abruptly cut in, his scarred face sniffing the air like some kind of demented bloodhound.

How did he know? Could he see Sam? Were both of them in danger now?

Tommy held his breath.

"There's someone behind the rocks."

"Who is it?" demanded Wilbur.

"I don't know, but I can sense them. Should I take a look?"

Tommy pushed down a gulp, breaking into a cold sweat. He didn't want to be the one to lose Sam to Dream because of his own stupidity. Not again.

"No," Wilbur replied to the boy's relief, "it's probably Tubbo or that mangy raccoon of his. Nothing to worry about."

Dream voice cut like a blade. "The deal was that he'd come alone."

"So? He's scared, can you blame the kid?"

Wilbur took a step closer. His hand snaked under his chin and stroked his cheek, leaving a wake as sticky as tree sap behind. Tommy wanted to scream and run away once again, but he was rooted to the spot.

Big brother.

"Don't worry, Tommy, you have nothing to fear. We're not going to hurt you."

The fierce glint in Dream's eyes quickly shut down that promise, and the boy only trembled more.

"Clay, you're scaring him."

"I'm just making sure he doesn't break another rule or agreement."

"He won't. He's a good boy when he wants to be."

Tommy yanked his head out of Wilbur's grasp. "I'm not your fucking bitch," he growled, just like one despite his denial.

"Oh, of course not. I didn't know you'd take it like that," Wilbur replied, nodding to the boy's whims and clapping his hands together. "You're not. You're a smart, talented, strong kid who helped my associate here out of prison! No "bitch" could ever do that."

The sweetness of his tone made Tommy sick, absolutely sick. He was close to throwing up, so close.

"You sent the note, didn't you?" he asked.

"Why, did you think I didn't?"

"Wilbur, you were dead. You *are* dead. You've been dead to me for years."

Since November 16th, Tommy had decided that he had never had a brother. No brother of his would ever go as insane as Wilbur had. No brother of his would train him with physical violence instead of encouraging words. No fucking brother of his would dare rip away the only thing Tommy and Tubbo had fought so hard for. And finally, no brother of his would be stabbed by his own dad.

That same day, Tommy had decided that he had never had a brother nor a father. He had Tubbo, and that was it.

The rest of his old life could go to hell.

He wasn't about to grovel and beg to get any of it back now.

"How the fuck are you here?" He already knew the answer, but he didn't want it confirmed. "Why the fuck are you here?"

"Can a brother not—"

"When will you get into that thick skull of yours that you're not my brother!"

A hand shot out and grabbed his hair, yanking his head back. His neck muscles burned, and Tommy let out a cry of anguish.

"I cut off my wings for you, Tommy." Wilbur's voice was cool, dangerous, dripping with the deadly madness of their days in the Pogtopia camp. "I hoped that one day, you could somehow repay that. The least you could do is be *grateful* for everything I sacrificed for you."

The hand dropped him, and the boy tried to soothe his hot and hurt skin. Tommy cowered out of the way, but still kept his anger boiling over.

"I never wanted to see you again," he snarled. "Hell follows you wherever you go."

Wilbur tilted his head to the side with all the innocence of a puppy, and the teasing tranquility of a maniac. "I thought you liked that."

"No, I liked you, Wilbur. I trusted you, I was loyal, and you were my brother."

The title fell like the blade of a guillotine, and Tommy knew then and there that he had lost the confrontation.

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

He let his head hang and chewed his lip.

"Was it?"

Tommy had to fight back. He couldn't fall and crumble again. He raised his gaze and glared at Wilbur. "Yes it fucking was. It was hard to cry for you at your funeral. It was hard to try and defend your actions. It was hard to remember you ever existed. No one wanted to give you a fucking headstone. No one wanted to remember you."

The moment the boy insinuated that he was forgotten, Wilbur rose to his full height. He stood tall and silent, his eyes doing all the talking his mouth didn't.

He had struck a nerve, that was for certain. One of Wilbur's many faults had been his vanity. He had been prone to a few narcissistic episodes, some less comical than others. Tommy knew how much memories, history and remembrance mattered to him. There was a reason he had decided to go out with a bang, quite literally.

The simple fact of being denied a headstone could—and probably was—sending him spiralling down again.

"It's hopeless," Dream interrupted, one hand on Wilbur's shoulder. "We don't need loose cannons in our army."

Tommy's entire being, once slowly lapping up the few drops of triumph, stuttered to a shocked halt. "Army?"

"Oh dear, the cat's out of the bag," the Nightmare snickered, his infamous grin sliding effortlessly back into its rightful place on his face.

"What army?" the boy repeated, weak at the knees.

Wilbur's face softened back into its lethal, slimy calmness, all tarnished vanity and hurt ego gone.

"It's a glorious one," he hummed vaguely, "you should see it. The only one that can outnumber the living. Its legacy will be long and glorious, and you could have been a part of it, General Tommy."

Oh. Oh.

Tommy did *not* like the fuzzy feeling that warmed him up when he was addressed by his title. He despised it, and yet he was still so close to succumbing to it. The sweet, sweet taste of his past life, calling to him like a seductive siren and ready to drown him when he came too close.

Instead, he let his fear take control. "You don't have an army," he muttered, hiding his nervousness behind gritted teeth. "No one sane would ever fight for you ever again."

"We thought so too," Wilbur agreed, "but turns out that everyone is easy to bribe if you promise them the right thing."

Tommy didn't expect that to be the end of their meeting. Wilbur spun around and left the way he came, without another word. The darkness swallowed him whole.

Now only Dream was left. His arms were crossed in front of his chest, far away from his sword. He was an easy kill, Sam just had to jump out and—

"Don't worry," the grinning prick cooed, "we'll meet again soon. I know how much you *love* to try and take me down. New year, new chances. Send my regards to Ranboo."

He left too, and the night was quiet once again.

Tommy stood in the middle of the rubble of the button room. Everything was dark, silent. Even the endless streams of fireworks had ceased, not that he had taken any real notice of them anyway.

"Tommy!"

Someone scrambled out from behind the rock face and rushed towards him. He didn't turn around.

"Tommy, can you answer me? Did he hurt you?"

Not physically, no. The pain in his neck had faded. He shook his head, still without a single sound escaping him.

"I saw what he did and I wanted to help, but I couldn't because they might have killed you there, and— Tommy, forgive me, I was so scared for you!"

But Sam had never left throughout the whole confrontation. He could have, but he didn't. He was there, and the boy hoped it would be for forever.

"I can never leave you now, Tommy. I will never leave you. We are going to be together forever, I promise."

The distant echoes of Wilbur's vow rang once again in his ears.

His big brother was back, and he had tried to keep their childhood promise. The only promise that the boy had clung onto his whole life, and the only one that, years later, he wished had never been made.

Wilbur was back.

Tommy burst into tears.

He turned around and without thinking, shoved his face into the big, soft wall in his way. Arms immediately latched themselves around him, his only shield. His only warmth and safety. It made him cry even louder.

His knees gave away and he crumbled to the floor, taking Sam down with him. He sobbed and sobbed. That was all he could do. The "big man" wanted to curl up into a ball and make himself so small, so small he could disappear. He tried, groping Sam's hoodie as he did.

It smelled like him; a sharp mix of gunpowder, musky redstone, Fran's matted fur and pumpkin pie. It felt like the gentleness of his hands, the softness of his smile, and even though now it was soaked with the boy's tears, it was home.

The only home he wanted, and the only one he needed. He *needed* it ever so badly.

Tommy cried himself silly into Sam's arms, burrowing as deep as he could go. As he continued to ball his eyes out, only one name filled his mind.

It wasn't Dream's.

It wasn't Wilbur's.

It was Sam's.

Sam.

Dad.

Sam had been more than ready to stay with Tommy in the derelict button room for the rest of the night if he had to, kneeling on the floor and letting the poor boy pour out everything, but then the moorland winds picked up. The new worry was then for Tommy's health and with some gentle persuasion, he managed to get the boy up and onto his feet. He led him away from L'Manberg.

Despite his furtive and frequent glances, Sam saw no sign of Wilbur or Dream.

The journey back was a difficult one.

The air was warmer when they ventured into the Greater SMP, where the packed crowds were still celebrating the New Year hours after it hit. They were assaulted with tipsy greetings and toasts from all sides as they passed, and the joyful laughter replaced the clammy silence of their previous surroundings.

It was delightful and festive, but neither of them were in the mood to join in.

When Sam felt Tommy start to tremble again, signalling another imminent breakdown, he draped both his arm and his cloak around his shoulders to shelter him from it all.

They kept walking in silence, eyes front and dreadful thoughts in their minds. There was nothing to say or to talk about without risking one or both of them bursting into tears or panicking.

Sam had heard everything. He had seen everything too. That didn't mean he wanted to process any of it yet.

His priority was Tommy, and the boy was not doing well.

He tripped and stumbled along, even with Sam as a crutch. The real scare came in the Nether, where after casting a single look down into one of the lava lakes with narrowed, tired and watering eyes, Tommy collapsed from exhaustion.

So tired, too tired.

Sam wordlessly carried him all the way back to Snowchester, stopping only momentarily to take off his hoodie and slip it carefully onto his kid. The bitter cold would do his current state no favours.

He climbed up the hill and tried to unlock the cabin door as quietly as possible. Every sound suddenly seemed too loud, and he flinched at every one.

He set down Tommy in the armchair and threw another log or two onto the fire, just to keep it going a bit longer. He then set about finding a suitable cushion and blanket for the boy.

He had just finished tucking him in when a creak resounded somewhere behind him.

"Sam?"

Upon seeing Puffy standing in the shadows, a shawl around her shoulders and her sheep-like legs anxiously tapping the floor, he sighed in relief. With a wordless gesture, he invited her to join him. The captain swiftly made her way over and rested her head on his chest.

"Happy New Year," she murmured.

Sam tried to keep his reply lighthearted. "Well, it's a New Year alright..."

She reached up and embraced him. He had never been one for the "first kiss of the year" tradition, but right now he really needed something to distract him.

When she pulled away after a couple of moments, he didn't want to let her go. He just held on, pulling her close. "Did I disturb you?"

Her sleepy eyes turned up to him and she gave him a tired smile. "Maybe."

"I'm sorry."

"You're the one who's going to have to deal with me in the morning."

He couldn't help but chuckle, the image of a grumpy little sheep too endearing to pass up on. "That's cute."

"I *will* destroy you."

"I'd like to see you try."

He leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss on her cheek, making her tilt her head towards him and a soft giggle escaped her lips. He gave her another, and then another, and another, until she was a blushing mess of hysterical laughter.

However, when the figure in the armchair stirred, they stopped their antics and fell quiet again.

"What happened out there?" Puffy asked in a low voice, her eyes flitting between him and the sleeping boy.

Sam sighed. "I wouldn't know where to start..."

"What about the note?"

His heart sank. "It was Wilbur."

A silence fell between them.

"So, he's back then?" murmured Puffy.

"I'm afraid so..."

"Shit."

"Shit indeed."

Another silence.

"Puffy, it was awful."

Sam almost broke down completely, just as Tommy had. Watching the kid—*his* kid, his *son*—getting ruthlessly torn down yet again by monsters had finally taken its toll on him.

"Things are going to end badly," he continued despite promising himself he wouldn't unload his unwanted burden onto poor Puffy. His chest began to swell with a familiar, gunpowder-scented ache. "I can feel it. More wars are going to break out, people are going to die, nations are going to burn and, and—"

"Sam, calm down."

A pair of soft lips landed near his ear, and a wave of warm, numbing water washed over him. He slumped his shoulders and took a couple of breaths, tuning in to the kiss. The explosion died down before disappearing completely.

"There," she whispered, pulling away and wrapping her arms around his waist. "Relax. Everything's okay."

Everything was not okay, not in the slightest. "I'm not ready," Sam found himself admitting aloud. "I'm not ready for another war. I'll never be ready again."

"It might never happen," replied Puffy, but the amount of confidence in her tone was a pitiful scrap, at best.

They both knew full well that a storm was coming, once again. The Egg was gone, and as much as that was a relief, it cleared the way for more dangers to strike.

They could lose everything, for good, and with one life each, they were far from ready.

He had never been more scared of death than when the night's horrifying realizations finally and fully engraved themselves in his mind.

Sam *couldn't* lose everything.

He tried to banish his fear and instead turned his full attention to Puffy wrapped in his arms. He took in everything about her: her messy curls, her sagging and tired stance, the way she regularly tugged her shawl back over her shoulders when it slipped and how her sheep legs and ears shook and twitched with shivers from the occasional blast of cold air.

His brain must have been getting sick with the constant and repetitive reminders of how much he loved her. Tough, he for one couldn't get enough of it. How much he loved his whole family, in fact.

Michelle, Tubbo, Tommy, and Puffy.

He wanted that to be his life, forever. His young, adorable daughter babbling away about anything and everything, his two brave and mischievous sons – whether they were his by blood or not – bickering and talking back with the endearing impertinence young adults always had, and his partner. His beautiful, brilliant love pressed against him in the moonlit cabin, small and soft, fiery and bold. He wanted his messy little family to stay the way it was, living a peaceful life in the snowy lodge and windmill on top of the hill.

He was yearning so much that he almost dropped to one knee there and then, without a ring but with all the love he could ever give, and more besides.

He would have if his voice of reason didn't reel him back into reality.

And what a reality it was.

Tommy stirred again, this time a lot more violently. It was a mix between him shivering and curling up into a whimpering ball, and thrashing around until his blanket was thrown clean off with loud cries. Immediately, something snapped in Puffy, and Sam watched as she rushed over to the boy's side. She cupped his cheek and began to card her hand through his golden-blond hair, whispering unintelligible things into the quiet. After a while, Tommy calmed down, and she tucked him back in again.

Sam was mesmerized by her patience and her methods, and his heart stung with the knowledge that he still had a lot to learn. "I wish I was capable enough to help him. I wish I was like you."

"If you were any different, you wouldn't be you. I wouldn't be as in love with you as I am. Michelle wouldn't see you as a father. Technoblade wouldn't call you his brother. Tommy wouldn't trust you as he does. The people of the Badlands wouldn't respect and look up to you. You wouldn't be where you are today."

"I just wish I could do more."

"We all do, Sam." The captain got up again and held his hand. "You look exhausted. Come to bed."

Sam looked back at the sleeping boy. "And Tommy?"

"He'll be alright now he's here. If he's not, then Fran will let us know." The dog in question was sleeping just a few feet away and opened one of her eyes, briefly

registering her mission before falling back to sleep again. "You'll be no use to anyone if you pass out on the spot."

He had to admit that Puffy was right, and that he definitely felt close to collapsing with exhaustion as well. He let her unclasp his cloak and his trident's harness, gently taking them off him and putting them to the side. Then, she took his hand once more, leading him upstairs. He followed behind with quiet, unstable footsteps, desperate to finally be able to put his feet up.

The soft, gentle lulling of sleep and his beloved's arms had never been so inviting.

At the top of the stairs, he couldn't help but look around for the last time. One last look, one last chance to check and put his mind at ease for the rest of the night.

Tommy looked calm and snug under the blanket, and his frantic episode could almost be forgotten. Fran had silently made her way to his side, curling up at his feet and taking her position as Tommy's guardian seriously.

Like master, like dog.

It was weird to see the boy so unnaturally comfortable and quiet. There had rarely been a time where Tommy was at peace. When he wasn't fighting for his life, screaming in anguish or cursing the entire universe with a questionable array of insults, he was talking for hours, annoying anyone in the vicinity and pulling loud, childish antics left, right and center.

The boy in the middle of a peaceful sleep wasn't a moment that many got to see. He was a lucky one. Tommy shifted, groaning and hanging one hand off the edge of the armchair. He brushed the top of Fran's head, and she dutifully raised it until his fingers were tangled in her silver fur.

Sam's heart only swelled more and more with each passing second. One day, he was certain that it would take over his entire body, if it hadn't already.

"I love you," he whispered into the sleepy quietness of the house and to everyone in it. He hoped that one way or another, they would all hear him.

"I love you too," Puffy replied a step or two above him, squeezing his hand and continuing to pull him along.

He almost fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. The cold, hard world had been conquered by a paradise of cotton, fur and woollen blankets.

Puffy pulled his head into her chest, her hands drifting to fiddle lightly with his hair. She gently trailed her hands across the scarred skin of his bare back as he dozed off, tracing little hearts across his shoulder blades.

"My strong, smart and handsome king," she whispered, "trying to make the world a better place for everyone."

The affection made his heart race. He would love her forever.

For a brief moment, before he slipped completely into unconsciousness, Sam could almost forget that their entire world was on the brink of burning yet again.

Chapter Seventy-Three: Family Meeting

The world burned.

The "world" on the counter top, that was. And the "world on the counter top", as in the eggs. They really *were* burning.

"Shit!"

Tommy immediately yanked the pan off the stove and cast it aside before blowing out the flame. He could have simply turned it off with the flick of a switch, but fuck redstone. He was too tired to trust it that morning.

Tentatively he poked the contents of the pan with a fork. The scrambled mess of yellow that he had done so well on was now completely calcined, more gritty ash than egg. He groaned and tipped them into the bin. So much for that attempt. So far, he had managed to ruin two loads of scrambled eggs, a few strips of bacon and even a simple glass of water – even he didn't know how he had managed *that*!

Fran huffed and tried to cover her head with her paws, thankfully the only witness to the boy's shameful attempts at cooking.

"Don't look at me like that," he muttered, putting all of his frustration into wiping his hands. "I'm trying my best."

In response, she whined.

"Yeah, I know you have a sensitive nose, or some shit."

A dog. He was having a conversation with a dog. That was what his life had become.

"You're just going to have to deal with it until I do it right."

That too could take a while, if he was being honest with himself... not that it would stop him in any way. With a determined scowl, he rolled up his sleeves.

Well, they weren't exactly *his* sleeves. He had woken up in surprisingly comfortable surroundings that were definitely not those of his treehouse. A nice, plush armchair, swaddled in a blanket and wearing a hug. At least, it was something that felt like one. Turns out, he was wearing Sam's hoodie, the very same one he had cried rivers into. Tommy didn't remember Sam taking it off. He didn't remember putting it on. He didn't remember saying goodbye to him either.

So that meant that he probably stayed with him until he fell asleep, which in turn suggested that wherever he was, Sam was probably not far. Therefore, by logical conclusion, Tommy was at Sam's. Once he had regained his bearings and banished the last few traces of his sleepiness, he realized that he was right. He was in Puffy's home – as far as he was concerned, that made it Sam's too.

He had every reason to take off the sweatshirt and leave it lying around somewhere, then leave and go home, and yet he didn't want to. It was far too comfortable to part with, and he much preferred a nice, warm cabin to whatever new draughts his makeshift house in the trees had to offer. And if that annoyed his hosts, then tough. Tommy was a certified, obnoxious force, after all.

Nevertheless, for their sakes, he felt that he could somehow lighten their mental burden, lull them into a false sense of security, and then hit them with his fully irritating self.

That's what he told himself, at least. That's why he was trying to make them some breakfast, as bait.

Not because he felt guilty, wanted to apologize, or wanted to say thank you in any way.

Not because he had finally allowed himself to open up and accept Sam and Puffy for what they were to him.

None of those.

But making breakfast that morning was no easy feat. He'd vividly picture what he'd want to make, scavenge for the ingredients, get it all ready, brown, toast or sizzle it to perfection...

And then Wilbur would fill his mind and throw him completely off track.

Everything would burn, from Tommy's strangely calm demeanour to the breakfast he was making, and he'd have to throw it away before starting all over again.

It was a stupid, vicious cycle that only served to remind Tommy that no matter what he tried to focus on or believe, evil and pain would catch up eventually. It always did. Wilbur always did, one way or another.

He wouldn't stop trying to escape, however, and he attacked his next attempt with a battle-hardened determination.

Hot chocolate.

He could do that.

He heated the milk, then added the sugar and the crushed cacao beans, and stirred all of it together. So far so good, despite his shaking hands.

He didn't know how Puffy made hers so delicious and creamy, but he had a chance to try and replicate it now he was using the same ingredients. He was getting closer to cracking her culinary code, and that spurred him on.

Even if it wasn't good, they could cut him some slack. It was the thought that counted, right? That's what everyone said when whatever he made ended up in the trash.

Sometimes, that was the only excuse he could use for L'Manberg too.

Oh, Wilbur died? It blew up and hundreds lost their homes? It tore the SMP apart for so long? It corrupted so many kind souls?

That's alright, it was the thoughts of freedom that counted, right?

Right?

If he wasn't careful, he'd plunge down into that well of regret too. He snapped out of it just in time to snatch the hot chocolate away from certain, burning death.

And he felt a pair of eyes on him. They certainly weren't Fran's – she had fallen back asleep again somewhere near the fireplace.

The stare wasn't hostile, or at least it didn't feel like it. Then again, Tommy's instincts had always been wired wrong and fucked up. He had thought Dream's violent abuse in his exile was a synonym for 'keeping him safe', after all.

A spoon in his hand as his only weapon, he spun around. Nothing. Then, he looked down. Something, or someone, was peeking around the edge of the stairs. The door to what he assumed was that big ass windmill was ajar, and he didn't hear it open.

He stared for a few moments longer, then put down the weapon. His little stalker moved out from her hiding place, and Tommy let out a huff of both relief and annoyance at his panic.

It was just the little zombie piglin he had briefly seen out of the corner of his eye the last time he came to Snowchester.

This time, however, he managed to get a good look at her. She reminded him awfully of Michael, and he was surprised he hadn't confused the two until then.

"How do," he greeted, still a little on edge. He held his head high to attempt to banish his insecurity.

In return, she gave him a bright smile and a clumsy little curtsy. "Good morning!"

She was definitely much older than a single year, or a few months, or whatever, and thank the gods for it. If not, Tommy would have been forced to have a long and awkward conversation with Sam and Puffy about the technicalities and genetics of interspecies breeding – which, if his previous "balls deep" comment was anything to go by, wouldn't go down well.

Which then brought him to another remark that he thankfully managed to bury in the back of his mind. Was adopting little piglins a trend he had somehow missed out on? Was there an illegal piglet trafficking scheme going on in the Nether that he had somehow been oblivious to?

Or had Sam and Puffy, very plainly, just gone and replaced Tommy?

She took a little step closer, still eyeing him out of her single, blue eye, and with a curious kind of innocence that would likely get her killed if she let it get the better of her in some places. Piglin or not, she was still very much a child, and Tommy was torn between bowing to her every demand without question and punting her out the window.

"So," he began, clearing his throat and turning back to the hot chocolate. "We've never really met before so, uh, what's your name?"

It had probably been said before, and he had probably forgotten it with the past days and nights' events.

"Michelle," she replied in a voice that didn't sound completely at home with some sounds and letters.

"Okay then, nice to meet you." He began to stir the drinks, not that he really needed to. "I'm—"

"Tommy," she replied for him, and beamed proudly when he looked down at her, taken aback.

"Uh, yeah." He paused. "That's my name."

"Momma and Papa talk about you a lot."

"They do?"

She nodded and gaily trotted up to him.

Was he surprised? Yes, absolutely. He had always thought that he wasn't worthy of legends and stories. Was he touched by it? Also yes, not that he'd admit it aloud.

"Are you my brother?"

He stuttered to a halt at the question.

He had never been a brother to anyone before, except perhaps to Wilbur years and years ago. Heck, even Tubbo and him had decided that they were only best friends, a title they considered stronger than any other. And now, apparently, he was an older

brother. He had never had a sister before. And did that mean he was a part of Sam's family now?

There were still so many unanswered questions, and so Tommy decided to take the simplest route. "Yeah, I guess I am."

The smile that lit up her face was bright and welcoming, and Tommy hadn't felt so lighthearted in a while. Nevertheless, he kept his cool.

Older brothers were chill, nonchalant and moody – then again, he didn't exactly have the perfect role model.

There was also part of him that wondered if he wasn't a little jealous of the fact that Michelle had just referred to Puffy and Sam as "Momma" and "Papa", with an intimacy that the boy had been lacking for a long while.

"What's that?" Michelle asked, standing on her tippy-toes and trying to hume the rising heat from the mugs.

Tommy picked her up and set her on the counter, then went back to stirring. "Hot chocolate," he replied.

Her eye went wide. She licked her lips as she inched closer, but Tommy was quicker and placed the two mugs on a nearby tray.

"Not for you," he reprimanded, ignoring the adorable, puppy-eyed stare he was given.

"Why?"

"It's for our parents."

Our parents.

Had he slipped up? Well, he couldn't exactly say he had in front of a kid. If she considered them brother and sister, then she must have known about the vow of silence. Even if no one had told her directly, she would know – all siblings were born with it, whether they were biological or not. It was one of the few good things the gods would sprinkle between the bickering and frustrations.

With those thoughts filling his head like an addictive, sweet drink, he climbed up the stairs and came out onto the floor above.

It was still as dark as the night. The curtains were still drawn shut, and the only faint slivers of light came from the stairs.

Tommy ventured a little deeper into the room, the teaspoons clattering incessantly against the mugs. He flinched and attempted to steady his hands. Unfortunately, that meant he wasn't paying attention to his feet, and he stepped on an obnoxiously loud floorboard.

Sam let out a deep, sleepy hum.

Tommy rooted himself to the spot, as still as a statue. He even held his breath. He stopped, and waited for a sign to stop, or to go ahead.

Sam groaned and nosed his face further into the crook of Puffy's neck. She in turn cuddled up a little more to him, a subtle, morning shiver running up her body and making her limbs and ears tremble lightly.

A sharp, uncomfortable knife stabbed Tommy in the gut. The tray weighed like a brick house, and his arms grew even heavier. The spoons only rattled louder with every passing second.

Before he wretched and dropped everything, he escaped back downstairs and dumped it all at a precarious angle to the side. The tray clattered noisily and one of the mugs almost tipped over, but the boy didn't give a flying fuck.

What the hell was he doing? What in the world ever made him think that waking them up – or heck, even attempting to make them breakfast! – was a good idea?

"Tommy?" Michelle called softly, still seated where he had left her.

Tommy had half a mind to turn around and snap at her, but stopped himself just before he could. A good older brother would never lash out at nothing but a name-call.

Wilbur would.

But that was the exact point Tommy was trying to make. Wilbur was a terrible older brother. He had to understand that. He had to try and get his past affections out of his head, for good.

Out, out, out.

He leaned against the counter, pulling the hood of the sweatshirt up and holding his head in his hands. He began to count to ten.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five...

He heard the deafening bell chimes of the night before with every number. Every ring brought nothing but misery. Even one of his coping methods had been corrupted by that selfish, arrogant, insane pri—

"Tommy, are you alright?"

Someone slowly came down the stairs and the boy quickly snapped to attention.

"Yeah... yeah, I'm fine."

The footsteps stopped. "Are you sure? I heard a crash."

"Yeah."

He raised his gaze. It was Puffy.

Her hair was a bouncy, curly mess, and she tried to discipline it a little by combing it back with her fingers. She leaned on the balustrade, a small smile and half-lidded blue eyes gazing fondly at Tommy.

Gods, she looked just like Tubbo when he woke up early too. Tommy was decidedly as blind as a bat for not putting two and two together sooner.

The captain sniffed the air a little, her grin only growing wider. "Trying to burn the house down, Big Man?"

"He did," Michelle confirmed proudly, running up to her mother.

What a little traitor.

A little more at ease, Tommy tested the waters. "Got to get my teenage frustration out somehow," he said, pointing to the bin filled with burnt food.

Puffy laughed then pet the top of Michelle's head. "Were you that hungry?" she asked him, her tone suddenly turning a little serious. "Tommy, you should have woken one of us up."

He would rather die than openly admit that he was trying to make them some breakfast. Then again, if he was going to die anyway, there were worse ways to go than to confess he saw Sam and Puffy as his parents. He also physically couldn't lie to her, and that was what pushed him to spill the beans.

"It was for you and Sam, actually." He coughed. "Because it's past eleven and you were too lazy to do it yourself."

Again, she laughed, but the tenderness in her eyes and tone only seemed to grow. "Tommy, honey, that's lovely of you."

Tommy was definitely taller than her, but instinctively as she came closer, he leaned forwards so that she could ruffle his hair. It felt nice.

She cast a look into the bin. "However, you did go through a lot of perfectly good food."

"Well, they shouldn't have decided to burn on my watch."

"Of course," she smirked, playing along, "they're in the wrong."

"Oh, absolutely! Ungrateful sons of bitches..."

"How about we teach them a lesson then?"

Tommy quirked an eyebrow. "A lesson?"

Puffy rummaged through some of the cupboards. Humming, she pulled out handfuls of new ingredients and put them on the counter. "A lesson," she agreed, striking a match and lighting one of the stove rings again.

And that's how Tommy learned to make pancakes.

Side by side with Captain Puffy and occasionally aided by little Michelle who seemed happy to be their little errand girl, he spent a good half an hour breaking eggs, stirring batter and pouring little puddles into the pan.

As much Tommy liked doing things alone, his independence being one of his biggest prides, cooking with someone saved his mind.

When he felt he was about to tumble back into a nightmarish headspace crawling with his brother's abusive touches, Puffy would gently nudge him or strike up a random conversation. The food didn't burn anymore.

He didn't talk to her about his fears or the past night, but he had a feeling that she somehow knew and made sure to keep him away from it all. She always knew how to act and help him, even if he didn't know how to do it back without somehow getting angry.

She was good, in every way. He was not.

"Puffy..."

"Mhm?" she mumbled, licking some of the stray, gooey mix off her fingers.

"I... I'm sorry."

She paused. "Sorry about what?"

"About that other time, when I yelled at you and everyone."

His throat tightened, and he closed his mouth. He leaned over the pan, extremely interested in the bubbling puddles of beige mix. Well, if the tears fell then, he hoped that everyone would like salted pancakes.

"Hey, honey, it's alright."

A small, soft cloud pulled him away from the food and brought him into her. With a gentle hand, she stroked away his fears and guilt. Tommy had never felt more like a child than he did then. His seventeen ripe years went up in smoke, and his mind regressed to one single word.

A single word that, strangely enough, he had never had a chance to utter in his lifetime.

Mum.

"You were angry, and you went a little overboard," the captain admitted, "but if you think we're going to love you any less for it, then you are sorely mistaken."

Tommy didn't deserve any of their love or forgiveness. Wilbur would have hated him. Dream would have hated him. Sam and Puffy decidedly didn't, and it was strange. He wasn't used to it. They were fucking freaks.

"Our love for you is unconditional, Tommy."

Ah, so that's what it was.

Again, he decided to test the waters. He took a deep gulp of air and with a trembling, hoarse voice, asked her; "Is it okay if I call you Mum?"

A moment passed. Then...

"I'm sorry, Tommy, what did you say? You're going to have to speak a little louder, sweetie, or try getting out of my hair."

She laughed softly, and he hadn't realized that he was whispering so low, every sound muffled by her curls. Fuck. He chickened out, pulled away and shook his head.

"I was... just saying that we should concentrate on the food." He coughed and flipped the pancakes over. "It's burning."

Puffy joined him soon after with a laugh and a playful nudge. "Can't have them join the bin, now can we?" she teased, and Tommy's spirits lifted considerably.

"Don't worry, Captain," he assured her, retreating back into the comfortable, loud tone he was used to. He brandished the spatula like a sword. "These ones are headed straight for our stomachs."

The whisk in Puffy's own hand suddenly became a cutlass that she too raised proudly. "Over my dead body, matey!"

They laughed and engaged in a friendly swordfight. It was nothing like the sparring matches Tommy had participated in before. This battle was decidedly more childish, which was a pity. Someday, the boy would have loved to train seriously with the Captain. They could probably teach each other a lot.

She let him win by feigning being stabbed in the chest. "Alas, I am dead," she groaned, dramatically staggering to the floor and letting out some over-acted death sounds.

Tommy laughed. "And that's why you don't fuck with the Big Man!"

"Aye, he will go down in the swashbuckling legends for years to come!"

They fell about laughing and a creak resounded from the stairs. All eyes turned towards them.

"Well, well, what do we have here, Captain?" Puffy grinned, still on her knees.

'Captain' Tommy smirked and put his weapon en garde, threatening the intruder. "I don't know, but they're a scoundrel!"

Michelle perked up as well, then rushed towards the newcomer. "Papa!"

Sam stretched, his eyes blinking slowly and painfully against the light. His shoulders rolled back and gave them a good view of his well-defined chest. It was dappled with green freckles and marred with scars, including three darker ones just over his stomach, lined up with each other in a perfect, horizontal formation.

The prominent marks of a trident wound.

Tommy almost threw himself, teary-eyed, at his feet again, desperate to beg for forgiveness.

Sam yawned and tousled his messy green hair before reaching down and lifting Michelle up with one arm. She squealed in delight when he put her on his shoulders, and she buried her snout in his hair.

"Good morning, everyone."

"It's almost lunchtime," Puffy replied, rolling her eyes.

"Nice to see you too, darling," Sam slurred, obviously still a little tired. He popped Michelle down on the counter and gave her a quick kiss. Then, he wrapped his arms around Puffy.

"Hi handsome," she smiled back, tilting her head up to catch his eyes.

"Morning death routine?"

"You know me. Got to keep the impending threat alive."

"Of course," he hummed back, then turned his eyes to Tommy. "Sleep well, Toms?"

The boy felt his heart jump into his throat. "Yeah."

He didn't know why it was so hard to say something. After all, he did sleep pretty well, not that he remembered any of it. He didn't remember any vivid nightmares, so he took that as a win.

Sam gave him a gentle smile. "That's good to hear."

Tommy caught his eyes trailing up and down his body, and he furrowed his brow in confusion. He looked down at himself. Right, yeah. The hoodie. He had almost forgotten.

"Here," he said, starting to take it off, "this is yours."

"That's alright, you can keep it," replied Sam, resting his chin on Puffy's shoulder. "I have others."

Tommy had to pretend that didn't make him want to run and hug the man. He sheepishly pulled it back down and gave him a nervous smile, one that strengthened only when he opened his mouth again. "Yeah, but no one wants to see your naked chest, Sam. Makes us all feel inferior with those abs and shit."

"I mean, I don't mind," Puffy mumbled, quickly covering her slip of the tongue with a cough.

"Yeah, you *would* like that, wouldn't you?" Sam teased, his voice dropping lower as he whispered into her ear. She turned bright red and tried to push him away.

Tommy made a face and rolled his eyes. "Gross adult stuff," he muttered, flipping over another pancake. It sizzled pleasantly.

As much as he was awkwardly trying to get certain images out of his mind, he couldn't help but smile at the strange feeling blooming in his stomach. Although the grossness of it all was very much there and was something Tommy would probably never understand himself, it felt normal.

Normal, as in he knew this shameless flirting was something that happened in families, or so the few testimonials he had heard suggested.

A family. He was part of a family.

"Something smells good," Sam hummed, leaning over his shoulder and sniffing the food.

"It does," Puffy agreed, beaming proudly, "and Tommy made them all by himself."

As much as he appreciated the attention, he felt like he was about to slip up and make a fool of himself by calling them something stupid. Like Mum and Dad.

"Puffy helped," the boy added quickly, giving credit where credit was due. "If you want to be sappy with someone, she's available."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sam answered.

Tommy felt his hand hover over his shoulder, unsure of what to do, and waiting for permission to touch him. He gave it by casting him a side-eyed look and nodding. Sam's thumb began to draw soft circles on his shoulder, ones that he could feel even under the sweatshirt. The heaviness of the touch was relaxing. Tommy knew he was safe here, with them, and so he leaned into it. The man behind him breathed out sharply, but the boy knew that it was in relief, just as relaxed as he was.

"I can get started on some omelettes too," Sam suggested, eventually moving away.

Michelle smiled brightly. "Can I break the eggs?" she asked, bouncing up and down.

"Of course, princess! I wouldn't think of giving that special job to anyone else!"

"You know what, Tommy," Puffy said, sidling up to him with a sly grin, "I think Mister Big Shot here is trying to surpass our cooking talents."

"Is he?" the boy said, playing along. "First his build, now his food. Fucking bastard, when will he stop?"

"Language," Sam tutted, covering Michelle's innocent little ears. "I'm not trying to surpass anyone, even though I most certainly can."

"Mhm. Well, if that's the game you want to play, we'll play it," Puffy decided, firmly taking a stance beside Tommy. "Team Pancake versus Team Omelette. May the best chefs win."

"That would be us," Sam replied, proudly sharing a high-five with his little teammate.

And they all got to work. Tommy never thought that cooking could give him such a burst of adrenaline, and yet here he was, whisking his way to victory.

It would have been a lot faster if Puffy was helping him, however. Instead, she had taken to trying to sabotage Sam specifically, who in turn demanded revenge and tried to sabotage them, and everything ended with an all-out side war between the both of them.

Eventually, when they had (finally) finished and actually sat down to eat, well after one o'clock in the afternoon, everyone agreed that the true victors were the kids. They were the only ones who had done anything worthwhile, after all.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Tommy playfully reprimanded the adults afterwards, wagging his finger in their faces. "Child labour is a crime!"

But he didn't mind. It was fun, in the end, and he was rewarded with the best brunch of his life.

Later on, plates, cooking supplies and excess ingredients were cleaned away. Tommy helped Sam with the dishes, thinking it would be the least he could do to thank them for their kindness before he left.

Funnily enough, however, they didn't kick him out. The boy realized he didn't want to leave either. So he stayed for a while more.

They all went to get dressed and freshened up, except for Tommy who decided that the hoodie was far too comfortable to take off. Then, Michelle went out with Fran, shouting something about going to play hide and seek with Michael. She tried to get Tommy to go with her, but he declined, using the cold as an excuse. In reality, he just wanted to stay inside and get a good feel for the new, strange surroundings he found particularly homely.

Quite unlike him and his usual, boisterous personality, he spent a good portion of the afternoon simply lazing in the armchair and reading one of Puffy's big books about pirate legends and sea monsters. Meanwhile, she and Sam worked together on some sort of project. A harbour and potential trade routes, or so the occasional word he caught implied.

He had almost forgotten that the Badlands was a thing, and that Sam was the head of it, or one of the heads, or whatever.

Honestly, Tommy didn't really want to get up and take an interest in what they were doing. He had had enough of politics to last him a lifetime, and ghost pirate ships and the Bermuda Triangle of the Old World were so much more interesting.

At one point, Sam went out. He came back a few minutes later, pocketing the paper and the pen he had taken with him. Tommy didn't think too much of it.

He also barely batted an eye when a crow crashed against the window. He did sit up to see what was going on, but Puffy got there before him and encouraged him to relax again. She said she'd deal with it.

Again, Tommy didn't think too much of it.

Even when someone knocked at the door, hours later, he barely looked up from his page. It was probably Michelle coming back, or Tubbo and Ranboo. It would be fun if they came along unexpectedly – they could all have dinner together. Yes, because Tommy had a feeling that he was going to spend the night again.

He hated Snowchester, but he loved it here, in Puffy happy little home. One more night wouldn't hurt. Two more wouldn't, either.

"Sorry we're late," a loud, gruff voice grunted as two figures shuffled into the room from the cold. "Nether traffic was hell."

Tommy froze.

"Don't worry about it." Sam sounded surprisingly relaxed. Why was he relaxed, of all things?! "Blame it on the Badlands. We've started carting in the materials to get started on the docks."

Why was he being friendly?!

Maybe the boy was fearing the worst. Yeah, that was it: he was prone to seeing and thinking the worst case scenarios in anything and anywhere he went. He heard one low, booming tone, and he thought the worse. That was all. He'd prove it. He'd prove it right then.

He looked up from his book.

Technoblade and Philza stared right back.

No one moved or said a word.

Tommy wanted to do so much: yell, scream, throw the heavy volume at their heads, borrow Sam's trident sitting by the door and stab them. Anything. And yet, his body wouldn't respond.

"We should go."

Techno turned to bolt out of the door, but it slammed shut in front of his face. A low growl shook his body, but Puffy didn't flinch. Tommy was impressed.

"Puffy, I'm not above breaking through a wall."

"Don't make this harder than it has to be." For good measure, she turned the lock. "If you don't cooperate, I'll throw away the key."

"And I told you that I'll just tear down your wall."

"I'm sorry about this, Phil..."

"Wait, what? Sam? *Sam!*"

There was a click, and a few feet away, one of the braces on the avian's wings fell limp. Sam emerged out from behind him, triumphantly holding up a single, tiny gear aloft. He threw it up into the air and caught it again, smiling brightly. "You get it back when all three of you settle your differences."

All three? Tommy had to apologize for something as well? Bullshit.

"What the fuck," he couldn't stop himself from interjecting, slamming down the book on the armrest next to him. "Are you seriously *grounding* me?"

Phil's eyes drifted to his damaged wings, and glared at Sam. "You bastard..."

"Okay, Mister Warden," Techno grunted, crossing his heavy arms in front of his chest, "are you holding us prisoner?"

"Prisoner, hostage, whatever you want to call it."

Puffy tossed him the key to the front door. He deftly caught it in mid air, so smoothly in fact that the whole action seemed rehearsed. How long had they been planning to lock these three harbingers of chaos together?

Tommy quietly promised to chew them both out later, if Techno or Phil didn't get there before him that was. Their glares said a lot.

"Sam, you don't understand. I can't do this."

He was taken aback by the utter desperation in Philza's tone. There was no arrogance, no anger, no resentment, nothing the boy had expected there to be. Instead, it was plagued with fear, and heartbreak.

"Philza, you avoided me completely for three months because of your jealousy, and now we're giving you a chance to get what you wanted and to explain yourself to Tommy."

"Explain?" Tommy couldn't stop himself from interrupting once again, looking from one to the other. "Explain what?"

Again, everyone ignored him.

Phil tried again. "But—"

"None of us can run forever," Sam said sharply, silencing him with nothing but a truth.

"I can," argued Technoblade.

"And yet here you are," Captain Puffy hummed, shoving past him, "held hostage by a sheep and a creeper."

The piglin said nothing.

The avian said nothing.

The boy said nothing.

They all simply looked at each other, not sure of what to do, or what to say, or perhaps even what to think.

"If you need anything," Sam said lightly, heading towards the stairs with Puffy, "just ask."

"I'm guessing our freedom isn't on the menu," Techno grumbled.

"Well, that all depends on you, doesn't it?"

And with that, Tommy was left alone with the banes of his existence, the Blade and the Angel of Death. Two traitors.

He felt sick. He wanted to run up the stairs and cower under the blankets. He would never, ever admit that to these two pricks, however.

Techno took the first step, and cleared his throat. "If we're going to do this, may as well do it like civilized people."

He pulled up a chair at the table. Tommy joined him, if only to seem non-threatening enough to avoid getting beaten into the floor.

"Phil?"

The avian was the last one to take a seat. He stuck as close to his piglin friend as he could, like the chicken he was.

Something about their hesitancy and awkwardness empowered Tommy, and he reclaimed his general's posture, solid and well-built. He was outnumbered, but he had the control.

"So, uh," Techno drummed his heavy fingers on the table, his eyes looking anywhere but at Tommy. They eventually landed on an invisible spot outside the window. "Nice weather we're having, eh?"

"Techno," Phil sighed, taking off his wide-brimmed hat and hooking it to the back of his seat.

It was a miracle that it was still in one piece. Tommy remembered playing dress-up with Tubbo – the avian's hat was his favourite accessory. It was just so ridiculous and oversized to the kid he used to be. He let himself linger on the fond memories a little longer, then brushed them aside. Now was not the time to reminisce. It would only make everything harder, and the boy angrier.

"What? It's a particularly nice day for the tundra. I'm merely pointing it out."

"Techno."

"Fine. We're sorry for blowing up L'Manberg." The piglin stood up. "Alright, let's go."

"*Techno.*"

"What else am I supposed to apologize for?" the piglin exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

"How about betraying me?" Tommy suggested bitterly, finally finding his voice. "Maybe you could start there."

Technoblade was called to apologize to him, but apparently he chose what he did or didn't take accountability for.

"I betrayed *you*?" he scoffed, sitting back down and leaning back. He suddenly looked so much more relaxed. "Please enlighten me."

He was taunting him, prompting the boy to explain himself and get angry, perhaps even getting him to retract his statement. He was treating him like a kid but unlike others, it wasn't out of comfort or care.

Tommy was ready to show that bitch that he was no fucking kid to him.

"Let me refresh your memory," he hissed, standing. "You betrayed us on the 16th. You fought by our side, then fucking stabbed us in the back."

"And you knew my intentions from the beginning," Techno replied with a chilling ease, without breaking a single, nervous sweat. "You reinstated a regime without the democratic agreement of the people. You somehow managed to make Tubbo's ascent to power even more illegal than Schlatt's was. You knew I was against that, and I had to act."

"Then why didn't you fucking say so, instead of just shooting blindly!"

"Violence is the only universal language, unfortunately enough."

Tommy hated that Techno was right about that. In L'Manberg, actions seemed to have counted far more than words, and the only way to get them all to listen at once was to blow up their entire nation.

He wasn't about to give that treacherous piglin the satisfaction of a victory, however. Tommy was still in control.

"And then," he continued, "there's Doomsday."

"Ah yes."

"Don't look so fucking smug."

To be fair, Techno wasn't. His eyes had darkened, and his snout was twisted into a frown – some might have called his expression remorseful. "I'm not."

"You teamed with Dream go blow it up. Why didn't you just leave us alone?"

"L'Manberg brought war to the SMP. It killed Wilbur, tried to execute me and yet you still ran back to it. We had a deal, Tommy."

"Yeah, exactly. We had a deal. We'd commit *minor* terrorism to bring them back to their senses, not spawn a fucking wither in the town square!"

"We just have different definitions of minor terrorism."

His answer was sure, but his expression was not. He knew that his defence was starting to weaken, just as his 'peer pressure' excuse had when it came to justifying Tubbo's execution.

In fact, now he thought about it, Tommy had far, far too many things to confront Technoblade about. They were just barely scratching the surface. If they ever went any deeper than that, then one of them would end up dying. The boy would make sure it would be Techno.

"Listen, Tommy," the piglin sighed, leaning forwards with clasped hands. "What happened to L'Manberg was a tragedy, but it was justified. It brought about too many problems. Maybe we should have talked it out in the Community House that day, but I was so damn angry. We were a team, you were my bedrock brother, and you ran straight back to those who exiled you. I was ready to fight the world for you. I stood up for you when no one else did. I sheltered you, for crying out loud! I taught you to make fireworks, to guide a sled, to cook, to ride Carl, to... Tommy, you were family to me, and you threw that all away, and for what? A stupid music disc. You betrayed me, and I was furious. Dream was angry too. He asked me to join him, to teach you a lesson, and so I did. It was a means to an end."

Tommy pretended that Techno's speech hadn't touched him, dragging up a nostalgia that seemed so old now. Living in the tundra with Techno, having finally escaped from his torturous exile where Dream guarded and gaslit him day and night, was a paradise. Yes, Tommy had left his side on that fateful day, but it wasn't because of a music disc.

It was because he loved Tubbo, and trusted him, and most importantly forgave him.

Clearly, Technoblade would never get that through his thick, voice-infested skull.

"So what you're saying," Tommy replied through gritted teeth, "is that you're weak."

Techno blinked, visibly taken aback. "What?"

"You get angry once without even looking for an explanation, and you join the dubious masked bitch with the comforting words and pretty explosives. Yeah, no, you're such a tough guy, Techno. Really."

"|—"

"You're weak, Technoblade."

"I'm not always strong," the piglin corrected, clearly struggling to keep himself together.

What was strange to the boy, however, was that he didn't know if Techno was about to burst with fury, or with an overdue apology. He was grasping at straws.

Tommy leaned back, thinking he had won that round. His next duel, however, he knew would be a little bit harder, even if Philza hadn't said a word to him, or barely even glanced his way.

But then, Technoblade said something unexpected. "You're right, Tommy."

The boy did a double take. "Huh?"

"I can be weak, Tommy, but sometimes, I can be proud of it." Techno's glare was sharp, demanding to be looked at and listened to, but his tone was strangely soft. "I was weak when I took you in. Dream was out for your head and you could have brought about more trouble than you were worth. I could have thrown you out, and yet, I was weak enough to give in to you and despite how it ended, I don't regret it."

Techno was fucking with him. He was manipulating his feelings, picking his brain apart and trying to get inside, to pull his strings in all the right places to make him crumble... He had to be, and yet his voice was oozing with sincerity and honesty. Tommy knew it was true, because the tone was unlike anything the boy had ever heard Techno speak with before.

"I saw you after the Red Banquet, with the fireworks. I was proud of you, Tommy, so proud. We may have defeated the Egg, but you guided everyone out of the nightmare of its fall."

"You defeated the Egg?"

Tommy didn't know that. He knew the Egg was gone, but he was certain that it was because the Eggpire dumbly fucked up or that it shriveled up on its own.

"We did," Techno agreed, looking at the chicken next to him. "Me, Phil, Nikki, Ranboo, Sapnap, Puffy and Sam."

The boy had so many questions, too many to be answered in such a short space of time. He did, however, have one that shocked him to his core.

"My dad never talked about being friends with you," he pointed out, suspicious.

"Tommy, that's ridiculous. Techno even babysat you when I—"

"I was talking about Sam."

Philza closed his mouth again, his feathers ruffling. Then, Tommy realized what he had just said.

He had just called Sam his dad, out loud this time, and in front of people. Even, he realized with a nervous shiver, in front of Sam and Puffy themselves, just a thin floor above them.

The fact that he said it in front of Phil was the only thing that didn't faze him. Philza was nothing to him, just as the avian had made it clear that the boy meant nothing to him either.

"Sam and I go back a few years," Techno replied. He too seemed barely startled by Tommy's slip of tongue. "He helped me, and so I helped him."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"Tommy, why do you think he's still alive today?"

All of Tommy's contempt suddenly shattered.

"No one could have survived that trident wound alone."

"What are you saying?"

All of a sudden, it dawned on him. Tommy had theorized a bit about Sam's survival. His running theory had been that Puffy had somehow broken into the Vault and tended him herself – that would have also explained the blooming romantic bond he had seen himself.

"What the *fuck* are you saying?" Techno being involved somehow was at the completely other end of his list. "You... healed him?"

The piglin nodded. "Reciprocity," he answered.

Tommy didn't know what that meant. He didn't know what that meant for him, for Sam, for anyone... Most importantly, he couldn't believe a word of it.

"Sam would never trust you," he muttered, "and neither would Puffy. You killed her son."

"You know, for someone who talks a lot, you seem to pretend that things can't be solved with words," Techno huffed. "We talked, we apologized, and now we're friends."

It was that simple apparently, and that hard.

Tommy still couldn't wrap his head around it. Sam and Puffy were good and sensible people. They would never trust someone like Technoblade unless...

Unless.

"And this may be hard to hear," continued the piglin, "but Tubbo forgives me too."

All hopes for peace were thrown out the window. How dare he approach Tubbo. *How fucking dare he.*

"First you take my nation from me, then you take my fucking family!"

He lunged forwards, groping at Techno's fur from across the table. It slipped through his fingers, silky locks trying to escape. He wouldn't fucking let it happen, and he held on tightly.

"I want to fucking kill you!"

"Then why don't you?"

The boy's grip slackened. Techno was just... giving himself up. Bending to Tommy's whims and fury, waiting for the axe to fall. Tommy wanted a fight, not whatever this was. It was disgusting.

"I wish I could forgive you," he spat in disdain, sitting back down. He was shaking again. "But you've given me no reason to."

"That makes two of us, then," replied Techno, the coldness in his eyes returning. "You'll always be that scared little kid lost in the snow with a big mouth, a stubborn attitude and no moral backbone. I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused you, but I've had my reasons and you had yours. We'll just never see eye to eye on them."

"No, we won't."

"You don't want my friendship, but I'm giving it anyway. I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing it for Sam."

As much as Tommy wanted to demand a proper apology, or more likely get into another heated debate or fight, he stopped himself. Despite his anger, the betrayal and the awful memories, something good came out of their confrontation: Techno's allegiance. No matter how questionable it had been in the past, it had always proved inherently useful. Especially now.

And Sam was alive because of the piglin. He couldn't exactly brush that aside.

Techno didn't deserve to be praised aloud, and so Tommy simply nodded.

The Blade leaned back, and grunted in return. Whatever taught tension that had been between them slackened, and there was a strange sort of peace in its place. A truce, however temporary it may end up being.

He could now turn to the bigger elephant in the room, and what an elephant it was.

Philza had stayed relatively silent throughout the confrontation with Techno, simply watching, hiding himself behind his busted wings, and occasionally interjecting with stupid, stupid remarks.

Now it was time for Tommy to finally make him talk.

He looked silent, sad. He had no right to be. He had no fucking right.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"I know, Tommy."

"But I have to, because you need to go. I want you to leave, and my mum and dad won't let you until we get this over and done with."

Now he was seeing him, now he was listening. Now he was paying attention to Tommy.

Watching the avian bristle was glorious. The word 'dad', no longer bestowed upon him, stabbed him in the heart. Tommy could almost see the blood trickle out of the wound.

The boy would have laughed if his tears weren't about to break through the dam built by his anger and resentment. Tommy thought this duel would be a breeze, that he would come out victorious, but it was so much harder to verbally tear down Phil as he had done with Techno. It was harder to bring himself to, at least. Phil looked like he was ready to crack at anything. The boy's mere presence seemed to be tearing him apart at the seams.

He didn't know why Philza was getting so worked up. After all, his affections for the boy had waned a long, long time ago.

In fact, Tommy was pretty certain that he could pinpoint the exact moment he had become a stranger in Phil's heart.

Six.

He was only *six* when it happened, when he saw his first real display of gore. He should have known then and there that Wilbur was insane, but all he could think of was how much pain his brother must have been in when he brought that damned axe to his wings.

It's for you, Tommy, Wilbur kept persuading both the boy and himself through gritted teeth and a fake smile. It was for his brother.

Philza and Tubbo had walked in a while later, when Wilbur held little Tommy in a sticky, blood-soaked embrace.

Tubbo screamed and started crying.

Philza had quickly acted, throwing a blanket over Wilbur's back to hide the horror and pulled Tommy away.

Then, setting the two youngest aside to comfort each other, Phil had begun to clean and bind his son's wounds. The actual care itself was preceded by a furious shouting match, with no actual victor but two, exhausted losers, and then devolved into a calm healing session with few words and even fewer glances.

In hindsight, that was the moment Phil started giving up on Wilbur too. He was such an easy man to break and mould with words and a little boy's tantrums.

Tommy was busy holding Tubbo's head to his chest when *it* happened, letting the little lamb bleat and sob in horror at what he had witnessed. The 'it' was a single question that Phil leaned down to whisper into Wilbur's ear as he wrapped a bandage around his torso. Wilbur's mouth had moved in an inaudible response, and Philza had finally looked up.

He crossed Tommy's gaze.

From that moment on, Tommy wasn't looking at his father, just like how Philza wasn't looking at his son. They were staring at a stranger, or an acquaintance at most.

Tommy had been too young to understand the whole ordeal completely and fully, but he had known something was wrong in his father's stare. Maybe he was angry at him.

That night, under the cover of darkness and his blankets, Tommy had cried. He still didn't know why.

Then, in the days that followed, Wilbur started going out more often. Before long, he didn't come back for dinner, or to sleep. After that, he rarely came home at all, his letters being the only traces of his presence within the breaking family.

About three years after he became a stranger in his own home, Tommy received a letter addressed to him. It was from his older brother. It was an invitation to join his new, budding nation.

So, at the ripe age of nine and ten years old respectively, Tommy and Tubbo left Philza's side and embarked on a new chapter of their lives. The avian made them promise to write to him, sending them off with tender kisses to their foreheads, but Tommy had cast that promise out of the window as soon as he stepped outside.

Philza wouldn't want to receive letters from someone he didn't know and likewise, Tommy didn't feel comfortable writing to a stranger.

Now he was sitting with that same stranger, years later, and wishing that dumb little crumb of childhood regrets would stop tugging at his heart.

Philza had killed Wilbur, had sided with Techno and Dream, and had helped blow up L'Manberg for the final time. Somehow, Tommy recognized him even less, and yet he couldn't bring himself to hate him completely.

"You're a prick," Tommy said.

"I know," Phil replied, his head down.

"You've fucked things up."

"I know."

"You've fucked my *life* up!"

"I know."

"And you don't even care about any of it."

Philza said nothing at first. "I do, Tommy, and I'm sorry for all of it."

The boy snorted. "Actually sorry, or Techno's kind of sorry?"

"Actually. Actually and desperately sorry."

Like with Technoblade, Tommy could hear the pure pain and remorse in the avian's voice. However, *unlike* with Technoblade, he had a hard time coming to terms with it.

"I don't believe you," Tommy snapped – or at least tried to.

His tone was shaking, and he didn't understand why. He had started off the conversation as the one in charge, as the leader, the confident one, with both the Blade and the Angel of Death at his mercy. Now, he finally and truly was feeling the cracks in the facade start to form.

"I don't believe you!" he tried to yell more sharply, his body and voice turning to jelly.

Philza raised his gaze from the tabletop, letting the boy see his eyes. Bright blue pools of nostalgia, a long history, and pure remorse. They were the eyes that laughed when little baby Tommy told a clever joke or accidentally whacked his older brother in the shin; the ones that filled with happy tears when Tubbo or Tommy proudly handed him a hand-drawn picture of their little family together with that endearing artistic ability only four year olds have; the ones that had darkened and sometimes cried when the avian knew one of his boys was unhappy, and when they left his care to run off with Wilbur.

They were the eyes Tommy had first loved and felt safe with. The first memory he ever had, in the ruins of the church. They were the ones that effortlessly brought him to tears, this very afternoon in Snowchester, years after he had last taken proper notice of them.

Tommy had expected to win this battle as easily as he had done the last, but even with fewer words and sharp attacks, he was miserably defeated. He fiddled with the sleeves of the green hoodie.

Tommy was seventeen. *Seventeen*. He was too old to act like a child.

He didn't care.

He rose sharply from his seat, knocking it over in the process, and bolted up the stairs. He didn't know where he was going until he crashed into Puffy's arms, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he whimpered, clinging onto her for dear life. "I tried to... to..." He burst into another fit of sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

He expected her to lash out and yell at him, call him a crybaby or a pussy, or shove him back down again into the awaiting jaws of hate.

Instead, she held him tightly, cradling him to her chest and rubbing his back. "Tommy, it's alright..."

He wanted to escape from everything, and she helped with that, pulling the hood of the green sweatshirt over his head and letting him snuggle into his own, little cocoon, or rather tomb. Tommy didn't want to come out of it again. He didn't want to be a stupid butterfly in a world of pain.

Another pair of arms wrapped around him for a minute or two, strong and safe. Sam placed a small kiss on top of his head, the embrace cushioned by the hood's fabric.

"Tommy, I'm sorry. You weren't ready and we should have known that, and we still tried to... I thought it would be a good idea if..." He trailed off. "I'll fix this."

The securing hold and heavy footsteps moved away. All the way, he kept muttering that he'd fix it, repair it, do whatever he could to be forgiven.

But it was Tommy's fault. Sam should have been disappointed in the *boy*, not in himself.

Tommy curled back into Puffy's body. Her shirt was already damp with his sobs, the warm tears forming cold puddles on the fabric that stuck to his face. It had probably been washed just the other day, and he had ruined it. He cried harder.

"Honey, breathe."

It was too hard, but Puffy wouldn't take no for an answer. She took exaggerated breaths, her fingers in his hair gently coaxing him to follow her lead. He did, because he was doing it for her. Even if he breathing somehow steadied, his heart certainly wouldn't fix itself so easily, nor his conscience. But he'd still do it, because Puffy was Puffy. She was poggers and he loved her.

Meanwhile, his ears were drawn to a completely different room, just down a flight of creaky stairs.

"Techno, I'm sorry. I thought you'd all be ready," Sam's low voice said.

"It's fine. Had to be done at some point." Techno's reply was more of a hum, doubtful and not entirely forgiving. "Your note said you needed us here for something else. Was that a joke?"

"No, not at all."

"Not another round of teary apologies with one of your kids, I hope?"

"No, nothing like that. It's about Wilbur."

"Wilbur, as in the dead one? What about him?"

"He's back."

There was a long, shocked silence. Tommy pressed his face deeper into Puffy's chest. He could hear her heartbeat. Then, a crash echoed up the stairs, and the stillness shattered. The cabin sprung back to life. Puffy jumped and fearing that she would leave him, Tommy held on tighter. Downstairs, he heard alarmed shouts and heavy footsteps.

"Phil!"

"Stay with us, buddy!"

"What do you mean he's back?" the avian spluttered. "That's impossible! Sam, he's... he's..."

"He's... well... I..." Sam suddenly sounded scared, unsure, and unable to find his words. "He sent a note to Tommy, and—"

"I know how much you love that kid," Techno grunted, "but even the gods know that he's a frequent liar."

That stung the boy, and Puffy as well judging by the way she tightened her arms around him.

"I was there too," Sam replied sharply, "and I saw him with my own two eyes. He's alive, and he's back for revenge."

"Sam, you must have been dreaming—"

"And Dream was with him."

"No, he can't be."

"Phil—"

"He can't be back."

"He is."

A long pause.

Tommy poked his head out of his hood and twirled one of Puffy's brown curls around his finger. His whole hand was shaking.

"Then I want you to kill me."

Another scuffle started. The noise was duller, and the cries far louder and more panicked. Tommy couldn't picture much, but there was the very obvious sound of a weapon being picked up, and simultaneously wrestled out of someone's grasp.

"Phil, no!" Techno's voice boomed, horrified beyond belief.

"Give me that fucking trident!" Philza squawked. "Kill me before I have to drive another sword through his chest! Stab me before I stab him! Kill me... Kill me..."

And he burst into tears, wailing loudly.

The Angel of Death *burst into tears*.

And once again, they weren't for Tommy.

But the boy had never seen the avian cry before, even when they used to be a bit more honest with each other so many years ago. It was new, it was strange, and it was terrifying.

It was *terrifying*.

Tommy didn't know what took over him, perhaps it was the macabre curiosity, but he pulled away from Puffy and ran down the stairs. He ignored her cry of surprise. He burst into the scene, cutting through the tension like a bolt of dry lightning.

"Tommy!"

Immediately, Sam's chest blocked his view, and the man held him tightly against him. For all he knew, Phil had already killed himself and was lying, mangled and fucked up, in a pool of blood. He wasn't, however. The boy knew what blood and death smelled like, and there was none of it here.

Instead, when he peeped around Sam's form, he was greeted by a tent of black wings drawn over a huddled, shivering frame. Technoblade was crouched down beside it, mouth moving in a hushed, inaudible tone that was only meant for Phil's ears and soul. The piglin occasionally looked up, crossing his eyes with Tommy's but there was no anger anymore.

And all this was because of Wilbur.

Bloody, fucking Wilbur.

If Phil didn't fancy stabbing him, Tommy would gladly do it himself.

"He's building an army," he suddenly blurted out, and the room froze again.

"An army?" Puffy gasped, eyes wide. She practically galloped down the stairs and came to join them.

"How?" Techno jumped in, still focused on the boy.

Tommy, realizing his mistake, cowered back behind Sam. "I don't know..."

"Tommy, how would they ever manage to build an army?!" He could feel the piglin get closer, and a dreadful chill skittered up his bones. "How, Tommy?!"

"Techno, that's enough," Sam interrupted with a sharp, warning tone. His fingers weaved their way into Tommy's hair, stroking his scalp reassuringly. "We don't know. All he said was that it was an army that could outnumber the living."

"That's impossible," Techno grunted, and Tommy heard him move away again. "There's no army that could ever outnumber the whole of the SMP, and if Wilbur is still lingering around that means he didn't travel to find one. He's mocking you."

"So, you think that this is a bluff?"

"Of course. I know how convincing Wilbur's lies are. He was just trying to get into Tommy's head."

The boy peeped back from around Sam, watching as Technoblade helped Philza to his feet. The avian was still shaking, and the salty smell of his tears burned Tommy's nostrils. Surprisingly, however, his red, rheumy eyes were not as sad or traumatized as he had expected them to be. Instead, they were unseeing, but pensive. When he sat down, he clasped his hands together, deep in thought. He could almost hear the cogs in his brain turning.

Then, after a minute or so, Philza bolted upright. "My gods, Tommy!" he cried. "Isn't it obvious?"

At the call of his name, the boy flinched, but his curiosity got the better of him and he straightened his posture before untangling himself from Sam's arms.

"Is what obvious?" he asked gingerly, careful not to get too close.

"There's only one force that could outnumber the living."

"I don't—"

Philza's bright blue eyes bore deep into his own, knowing and alight with realization. That didn't mean they were happy – far from it.

"Tommy," he said, his voice coated with a horrific chill, "they're going to raise the dead."

Chapter Seventy-Four: The Start Of A Revolution

"Realistically," said Protesilaus, "how scared should we be?"

The Syndicate hadn't been called together in so long. When they had all gotten the message, however, they knew that their reunion was to do with something serious. How serious, they didn't know until they actually got to the meeting room and got the briefing. Now, they were all sitting in a shocked silence.

"Are you looking for an answer on a scale of one to ten?" ventured Nemesis, her voice softer and quieter than ever before.

"I'm just looking for an answer, full stop," replied the piglin. "So?"

"Well, are we sure that it's real?" Lethe asked, speaking up for the first time in ages.

He had seen the letter, and he had offered his theories and perspective on them. He didn't know what had happened next – he was just as clueless as the rest.

Or, as *most* of the rest.

Daedalus lifted his head up from the table, only barely, and dragged a frustrated hand through his hair. "Oh, it's real alright." He chuckled, but there was clearly nothing happy about it.

Lethe's tail began to curl and whip from side to side anxiously. He drummed his fingers on the cover of his memory book. "Then... I don't know..."

"Fucking bastard, he can never let anything go, can he?!" Herostratus banged his fists on the table, and everyone jumped.

Herostratus' presence among them had been an unexpected one, but pleasant nonetheless. He had been caught up by his reinstated duties in Kinoko Kingdom, as well as extra tasks to try and prove his loyalty to his people, or so he had said. His smile, cocky banter and sly grin was something that they had all missed, but when the news about Dream and Wilbur broke, it had all been swept away to a dark, forgotten corner of the underground meeting room.

Herostratus collapsed in his chair, tugging and pulling at the silk band in his hair with pained frustration. "Stupid, stupid bastard," he muttered, "Nothing's ever enough for him, fucking asshole..."

Everyone knew that Wilbur wasn't the victim of his heinous insults and despairing cries.

Only Zephyrus stayed remotely silent and unmoving, not even crossing anyone's gaze. It didn't take a genius to know why.

Wilbur was back, and no one was happy or prepared to face it yet, least of all his own father and murder—

No, Zephyrus wasn't a murderer. He had done what was necessary, even if it hurt him. A murderer wouldn't force himself to kill someone if it would pain him more than anything, Lethe was sure of that.

"We said that once the Egg was gone, we'd focus on the Plague," Protesilaus reminded them all. "Now it seems we have Orpheus to add into the mix too."

Lethe blinked in puzzlement. The Plague? Orpheus?

He discreetly flipped open his memory book and glanced at the current notes from today's meeting.

The Plague = Dream

Orpheus = Wilbur

Theseus = Tommy

Right.

Protesilaus did mention something about keeping all names in code, just in case someone was listening in. It seemed pretty unlikely, but then again, so did Orpheus returning to them, and it had happened anyway.

"So," the piglin began once again, leaning forward, "we know bits and pieces. We have no date, no time and no way of guessing when or if they'll attack. What we can try and figure out however is how big their army is. Lethe, take notes."

Lethe dutifully opened his book and prepared his pen.

"They're raising the dead," Nemesis said, "we know that much."

"We just need to figure out how many that could be."

"It's impossible," Herostratus pointed out. "First of all, we don't know how many people lived and died in L'Manberg. Then, we also need to count the Greater SMP, the Badlands, Snowchester, Las Nevadas, the Temple, Kinoko and even overseas visitors. There's no way we have records for all of them. And then, how do we even know that they're going to limit themselves to our lands, in our time? They could summon Napoleon fucking Bonaparte for all we know, and then we're screwed for good!"

"There's no way we can know," Lethe wrote down, then said aloud.

Protesilaus sat back, pensive once again. He drummed his heavy fingers on the table. "We can't guess numbers, then... What about individuals?"

"Individuals?"

"Potential candidates for revival," the piglin clarified. "We can't find them all, but we could get an idea of some faces that could pop up again. If Orpheus is back, then others might be too."

"I can only think of one," Nemesis said. Her voice softened again when the others looked her way. "Schlatt."

"Schlatt?" Protesilaus laughed. "You know what, I almost forgot about him! Well, if that's the best the Plague can bring about, I'd say our worries are null and void."

He seemed to be the only one that was amused by it. Lethe certainly wasn't, and neither were any of the others. Nemesis bit her lip, memories of the Manberg dictatorship flashing behind her gaze, Herostratus and Zephyrus shared a look, and Daedalus suddenly rose from his seat, fuming.

"If that bastard dares come anywhere near Puffy or Tubbo again, I'll tear his throat out," he promised in a low growl.

Protesilaus dropped his smile and sighed. "We'll tear his throat out anyway," he assured him. "The question is where, when and how."

"As soon as possible, with my trident planted in all their necks," Daedalus replied, in a tone that made Lethe shiver. He had never seen him so dangerously bloodthirsty. "Three prongs for three monsters."

"Daedalus, take it easy—"

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down!" he yelled again, shaking Nemesis off his arm. "I have a family, and I don't want any of my kids to get hurt! I don't want the love of my life to get hurt! Yes, we should be terrified of whatever those two villains are planning, because one more big war will be devastating to everything we've managed to build after the last one! Now we have precious things to lose, now most of us are living on borrowed time and lives! We're not ready for another war, we're not, we're..."

The bloodlust washed away immediately, leaving a trembling, agitated shell behind. Daedalus collapsed back down in his chair, his hands brought up to his face and his words coming out as stuttered breaths.

Where others would have called him insane or over-dramatic, Lethe called him right. He was right about it all, and the nervous looks from the other members told him that they knew it too.

Their times of peace were pure paradises, but they were only part of the calm before the oncoming storm. Because of their lives rebuilt by tranquility, they hoarded everything good and loving, and now had too much to lose.

His mind quickly flashed to Tubbo and Michael, snug and warm in their Snowchester cabin where he had left them. Did they know how much danger they could be in, what they had to lose and most importantly, could Lethe be sure he'd protect them?

The answer to all three was a worrying, painful 'no'.

"It's not up to us to choose if we're going to battle them or not," Zephyrus whispered, filling the silence with words as fleeting and soft as feathers. "It'll find us eventually, and we will have no choice but to fight."

"I know, I know," Daedalus muttered, scrunching his face up in frustration.

"We can't do it alone." Protesilaus took the lead of the conversation again. "I thought that we might, if the Plague was the only one we had to worry about."

He gestured to Lethe, who understood his want immediately. He flipped back through his memory book until he hit a page from a snowy, comfortable day where the piglin and him started to devise some sort of attack plan involving the whole Syndicate. It had needed polishing, but it had still been a potential outline. Lethe scribbled it all out.

"Well, then what do you suggest we do?" Nemesis asked, tilting her head to the side.

"I hate to say this, but we're going to have to collaborate with the other nations."

Collaborating? With the governments he had previously set out to eradicate? If there was a mad person at this table, it would have been Protesilaus, hands down.

But it was the most sensible idea any of them had heard in a long time.

"Daedalus, can we get the Badlands on board?"

The man in question waved his hand dismissively, his glassy look betraying his absolute indifference to everything, mind likely too muddled to give a coherent answer. "Easily."

"And Herostratus?"

"I'll talk to Karl," the fireborn replied, a lot more conscious than his friend was.

"Convincing him won't be a problem. Kinoko will stand with us."

"At least we have two armies on our side," Protesilaus nodded, sighing in relief and leaning back. "That's better than nothing."

Then, he made a face that almost made Lethe burst out laughing if the hour itself wasn't so dire. It wasn't one of utter disgust or contempt, but rather a drooping realization that he had just lost a battle, and his ego along with it.

"I hate to say this," he grumbled, "but I think I need to schedule an audience with His Majesty the King of the Greater SMP..."

"Hey, Sam?"

"Mhm?"

"Are you alright?"

Maybe it was wrong for him to ask. Sam stopped in his tracks, and Ranboo did the same. The Nether air was stuffy, and the hybrid's shoes were slowly melting where he stood. Sam, on the other hand, was as stone cold as a statue, even with the heavy winter cloak that coated his shoulders and his armour.

Ranboo envied his ability to adapt so easily, while he himself was dying and starting to turn into an ender-puddle on the floor.

"I am," the man finally replied. "It's just... a lot at the moment." He looked at the hybrid, and gave him a forced smile. "It's a lot."

"Yeah, I get that..." Ranboo tugged at his tail. "I know what you mean..."

He knew exactly where Sam's thoughts were, and he shared similar ones.

"I don't want them to get hurt," they said in unison, only turning to each other when their words fully sunk in.

Ranboo pushed himself to be the first one to try and humour them both. "Sheep, am I right?" he ventured with a grin, his thoughts filled with Tubbo.

Sam sighed, but his eyes softened from their frozen, unmoving stare. "Sheep," he agreed, sounding somewhat amused, and started walking down the cobblestone path again.

He looked a million worlds away, but this time the hybrid could finally see which one he was reaching for. Green irises replenished with a deep and fervent affection Ranboo had only seen directed at one other person before. He didn't even need to refer to his memory book to know who was currently invading Sam's mind.

"I promised her a lot, Ranboo," he said, "but another Doomsday was not a part of it."

"It wasn't in our plans either," the hybrid added.

He had a feeling however that Tubbo wouldn't exactly mind. Of course he'd be worried, but the hybrid knew that the anxiety would quickly be dispelled by a thirst for adrenaline and a taste of his glory times long gone. He had also admitted to Ranboo at one point that he wanted to prove to everyone that Snowchester was much more than a mere tundra retreat, that "it has balls", to quote him exactly. An excuse to fight Dream again in a blaze of triumph seemed too good of an opportunity for him to pass up on.

That was exactly what Ranboo was worried about. He had seen the people's bloodlust when Pandora's Vault was attacked, and he could only imagine what kind of follies a chance to stab the Nightmare again would awaken.

They were ready at a moment's notice – Ranboo and others were not.

The main Nether hub came into view, built on sturdy carved pillars that plunged into the lava below. The Greater SMP's portal was bright and glowing, but surprisingly, there was no one else around. The closest things to living presences was a faraway Nether patrol

trotting across the lakes on their striders, and the loud snorts of the piglins that lived in the nearby crimson forest.

Ranboo and Sam ventured through the plasma, and stepped out on the other side. As usual, the hybrid checked that every piece of him was in the right place, and Sam only barely checked his trident.

"There's something going on at the Community House," Ranboo noted, pointed ears twitching as the thrumming muffled environment of the Nether melted away into the fresh January breeze of the Greater SMP. A crowd was packed between the walls of the red-brick crossroad marker, shrouded by excited whispers and awe-filled gazes.

Sam said, halting beside him, just as puzzled. "Huh," he hummed, "it must be pretty exciting if even the merchants aren't pushing past."

A couple of the roads were clogged by unmoving carts and carriages, the driver's invisible and their animals restless.

"That's saying something," Ranboo agreed, then felt his soul momentarily leave his body when a loud shout abruptly rose above everything else.

Sam laughed, a small smile breaking through despite it all. "I don't think the merchants have much of a choice in the matter."

Still trying to calm his racing heart, the hybrid nodded. The day that Tommy wouldn't suddenly scare the life out of him would be the day he truly knew something was wrong with the world.

A small child standing at the edge of one of the doorways looked back suddenly, and his face brightened up. He tugged at the sleeve of the nearest person next to him and pointed at the newcomers. Before long, news of their arrival had rippled throughout the whole gathering and the people began to file out of the Western arch, towards the Nether portal.

Two moved faster than the rest, tripping over their own feet and the stone stairs leading up the hill.

One got there first, almost crashing into Ranboo and laughing.

"Tommy explained everything!" Tubbo panted, breathless. A wide, sweaty smile stretched his face, as if he had just run a mile.

"Does your mother know about this?" Sam asked, startled eyes surveying the scene.

"I thought you could have the honours of surprising her," the young ram smirked, then gandered off back to Tommy's side. "That's what you're there for."

"Well, Sammy?" Tommy cried out proudly, gesturing to the crowd behind him. "What do you think?"

It was enough to fill a couple of small battalions, that was for sure, but Ranboo was certain that the boy had grossly underestimated the threat. If it was as potentially serious and terrifying as the Syndicate had theorized, then the decidedly small group of people would be plowed down in less than five minutes. Now, they just had to try and get Tommy to understand that.

"Well, Tommy, there's, uh, a slight—"

"It's great, Toms, it really is," Sam interrupted.

The hybrid was about to correct the man on that, but one gentle tug on his tail got the message through. He changed his tune immediately. "Uh, yeah. It's great!"

Faced with the boy's beaming expression, he didn't dare retract anything. Sam walked up to the boy and affectionately ruffled the top of his head. Tommy groaned on cue, but he didn't try to shy away. Perhaps there was some sort of progress there too.

"Hot chocolate night when we get home?" he suggested.

Sam smiled, this time genuinely. "Of course, that sounds nice."

"Same here with you, Ender Boy!" Tubbo ordered, giving Ranboo a sharp but playful headbutt to his abdomen.

Sucking back in the air that was knocked out of him, Ranboo nodded.

"Poggers!" Tommy flashed them all another proud grin, and turned his attention back to Sam. "They're all willing to fight for us, all of them! Those bitches may think that they've got an army and we don't, but we'll show 'em we're not weak!"

Ranboo watched Sam's reaction carefully. There was a hint of pride behind the gaze he coveted the boy with, but also a whole lot of worry and concern. The reality of their oncoming situation finally began to sink in, and what was truly at risk did as well.

And, above all, the fact that everyone was dangerously underestimating the situation. Two battalions wouldn't amount to anything, except a given massacre.

"So, the news is out now, is it?" Sam asked, his voice low.

Tommy's smile dropped, and his Adam's apple began to bob nervously. "Was I not supposed to say anything?"

Not ideally, Ranboo had to admit. Their small group of friends barely knew what they would be up against, and were planning to play things carefully and sensibly. Tommy being Tommy had apparently rushed in head on yet again, leading a group of people into a fight they knew nothing about.

"N-No, you did good," Sam replied, looking and sounding just as anxious as Tommy was. He rested a hand on the boy's shoulder. Every one of his movements was awkward and strained, betraying his conflicting thoughts.

Again, Ranboo was about to interrupt him, but Sam got there first.

"In the end, Tommy's right," he sighed, turning back to the hybrid. "We need to start preparing one day or another."

Ranboo changed his tune for the second time in less than a couple of hours. Also, for the second time, he agreed with Sam's point.

Everything was inching closer to the tipping point, whenever and wherever that would be. The reality was creeping up on them as they stood and spoke in denial.

They had to start accepting that and as always, Tommy and Tubbo were one step ahead of them all.

"I don't know what to do."

"And you're asking me?"

Sam quirked an eyebrow. "You're a leader of the Badlands too, aren't you?"

"Well yes, but..."

"But?"

Antfrost fiddled with his claws. He never remembered them being so sharp.

"But?" his friend probed again.

The cat sighed, defeated. He looked up and crossed Sam's expecting and waiting gaze. He could tell him anything. He had to tell him everything.

"Listen," he began, caving in, "I helped lead the Eggpire, but that doesn't mean I'm fit to run the Badlands. Back then, that leader wasn't me: he was a shell filled by a demon's evil and puppeteered by it too. Now, I'm back, and I can see the consequences of any mistakes I could make. I can see the prices now, and they're not pretty."

"We can all see them, Ant, but—"

"Sam, I was never made for this. I came here as a biologist, now I'm a leader. I mean – gods! – something's not right here, is it?"

He let out a forced laugh, which Sam didn't join.

"So?" he replied. "I came here as a redstone engineer. That doesn't mean we don't belong in our position."

Antfrost frowned. Sam didn't seem to be getting it, or maybe he was just purposely playing dumb. Whatever the case, Ant had to find a way to explain his hesitation, his reluctance to act on his own accord.

"You were born to be a king, Sam," he told him. "I wasn't."

Sam's expression changed drastically. His soft eyes darkened, bottling up a storm, and he turned away. He headed over to the open window and gripped the ledge, staring off into the night.

"Please, don't say that again," he whispered, barely looking back.

"Say what?" Something clicked, but the cat didn't exactly understand any better. "Sam, it's just a saying."

"Still, just... don't. Please."

Sam was still a mystery to Ant, sometimes. Getting worked up at a mindless observation – heck, Antfrost considered it a compliment – was only the tip of the iceberg. He had never talked to the cat about his past, and Ant had never asked either. That seemed to

be one of the few, unspoken boundaries that they never crossed, and were both satisfied with.

But in a time where experienced leadership was imperative, Sam's was wavering.

In a way, Antfrost had a right to know and demand a coherent reply – yet he still didn't dare do so.

Sam straightened his posture, rolling his shoulders back and arching into the cold ocean breeze. He turned back around and rested his elbows on the windowsill.

"You might not be a born leader," he said. Then, a bit more bitterly: "Maybe I am, but that doesn't matter. If you don't want to answer as a leader, I won't blame you, but I just need a reply from my friend."

A friend. At last, the hole in his heart that still doubted Sam's forgiveness was sewn up, the string tied in the prettiest bow.

It didn't last, and more serious questions had to be tackled.

"What do we do about Dream and Wilbur?" asked Sam.

"We fight."

Antfrost didn't know who he was speaking as anymore – friend or leader, his mind thought the same thing. He hated that clashing blades was his first thought and so, it seemed, did his friend.

Sam made a face and pushed himself away from the window's ledge. "That's the only choice we have, right?" he sighed. "As if those bastards will ever solve it any other way..."

"It's kill or get killed," the cat agreed with a shiver.

"Killed?" squeaked a voice from the door.

As they turned, Antfrost's heart soared and then plummeted. Velvet was there, wrapped in a soft blanket, his cherry-red hair a mess and his eyes bloodshot. He was there, but he had heard everything and was staring at the Badlands' leaders with wide terrified eyes.

Wordlessly, the cat stretched out his arms to embrace his husband, but Velvet strode right past him and straight to Sam.

"What do you mean, 'killed'?" he demanded, squaring up to him and still only reaching to his collarbone.

Sam's eyes grew sadder. "There's a massacre coming, Velvet. We would have given everything for you not to be here to witness it."

"I don't want you to get hurt," Ant said, gingerly reaching out to touch his shoulder.

Velvet spun around and glared at him. "I don't give a shit about my well-being!" he snapped, slapping the cat's paw away and capturing his fluffy face between his hands. "I'm worried about *you*!"

"I've been in battle before—"

"All the more reason for me to shackle you down and lock you up somewhere. I've lost you once before, and I'd rather die than have it happen again."

He wouldn't. Antfrost would rather mercilessly rip himself out of Death's grasp – bloodstained clothes, fatal injuries, eternal damnation and all – than part from Velvet again.

He purred against his touch, sinking into the softness of his fingers and the way they gently tugged at his fur.

His love for him was rooted far deeper than any superficial loyalties to a scrap of territory, and yet that same loyalty wouldn't let him go without a good, moral fight first.

He didn't want to fight, but he needed to.

"Dream is a dangerous man," he mewled, rushing to sink down and bury his face in Velvet's neck when he felt him tense up. "If we don't stop him or his cronies, there will be no point in living at all. We'd be better off dead."

"You should have left when you still could," Sam said softly, interrupting the conversation. They brushed his presence aside, but his words still stuck.

"Maybe we should have," Velvet mumbled, the heavy doubt in his voice unnatural and eerie.

Antfrost's throat tightened, his heart beating with the drums of overdue regret. "Maybe we should have... It's too late now."

His reply came out sharper than he intended it to. Yes, he wished he had left with Velvet, but not if that would mean his friends would be left to fend for themselves and die a helpless death. He would fight for Velvet until his soul was forcefully ripped away and similarly, he would fight for his friends until his final, mortal breath.

The cat raised his gaze. "We're here now, and we didn't run." He faced Sam again, clicking his heels and saluting him as if he was his general. "I'm fighting."

"And so will I," added his husband, to which Ant's mood changed completely.

"No."

"Yes."

"You're not fighting."

"Yes, I am."

"Velvet, you're—"

"Not strong enough? Too precious? Too fragile?" He tutted and dragged a flirty finger underneath his chin. "Babe, if I can top you for hours, I think I can face a few foot soldiers easily enough."

The skin under Ant's fur heated up until he was certain he had turned as red as a lobster, and he cast a nervous, side-eyed look towards Sam. His friend didn't know where to look, coughing awkwardly and scratching his cheek before turning his eyes back out the window.

"Thank you for that helpful input, Velvet."

Antfrost couldn't help but snicker.

His husband looked back at him. "Needless to say, I'm fighting," he decided, "even if I have to train entire days to get on your level."

His heart sinking, the cat realized that it was useless to even try to talk him out of it.

"You might not need to, Velvet," Sam said with a sigh.

"What do you mean?"

"The Badlands might not fight anyway."

Startled, Antfrost stared at him. "What do you mean?"

Sam made his way over to a table covered in papers and maps. He began to search through them. "The Egg had a bigger infection rate than we thought," he said. "When the Eggpire and the infected fled, we lost a good three quarters of our population. Those who remain are either old, injured or children, and no—" He looked up suddenly with a glare. "—I am not making the children fight. Those days are done. If we go into battle on our own, we'll get slaughtered, and I can't let that happen to our nation."

"Maybe we should find them."

A fourth voice joined them, and they all froze to the spot. A newcomer lingered by the doorway, leaning against the frame in a surprisingly relaxed manner, far from the straight and tense postures of Antfrost and Velvet or Sam's hunched back, crushed by the weight of the situation at hand. Blue eyes glimmered in the dark, the fire casting orange shadows on gem-encrusted skin and made the jewels shimmer like shattered glass.

"What are you staring at?" Skeppy snapped, looking from one leader to the other.

Ant was still stunned into silence, but managed to get his bearings to try and say, "Skeppy, what are you—"

He was quicker, and pushed himself up from the threshold. "I said, maybe we should find them."

Antfrost looked at Sam for help or an explanation, and instead found his friend staring at the unexpected arrival with shocked eyes. "You should be asleep." His tone was gentle, practiced even, as if he was calming a child.

Skeppy, however, soon reminded them that he was none of the sort by marching over to Sam and getting right up in his face. "You have a problem, I have a solution," he said. "We need more people? Then we find them."

"That's easier said than done," Ant replied, deciding that indulging the surprise presence was the best course of action for now.

"Where do you expect us to find more willing soldiers for our troops?" added Sam, following Ant's lead. "We can't exactly beg the Greater SMP or Kinoko for them."

"We find them when we find the rest of the Badlands," Skeppy replied simply, and the room fell quiet.

Ant and Sam shared a look. "Believe me," the cat began, his ears and tail drooping, "we've tried."

"Well, you haven't tried hard enough," he spat back, pushing Sam away from the maps strewn across the tabletop. "Look, have you ever thought of—"

"We've tried *everything*, Skeppy," Sam said, rising up to his full height. "We've sent armed patrols, search parties, nationwide appeals, even wanted posters and rewards. We've *tried*. You're not the only one who's desperate to find them."

Skeppy's shoulders sagged, and his enthusiasm was quickly banished. In the space of a moment, he regressed back into a dark, dingy shell, the one that haunted the mausoleum of a bedroom just down the hall from them. The only thing that still shone were the diamonds embedded into his skin, flickering orange like the flame of the candle he stood as a mourning vigil with.

"He can't be gone," he mumbled, in a tone of desperation that Ant hadn't heard from him for ages. "It's always been me and him. He said he'd never leave me..."

But he had. Bad had clearly left Skeppy to the mercy of the Badlands, and had taken the rest of the people with him. With every passing day that there was no news or traces found, a little bit of hope in each of them died. They started cutting down the patrols, and would probably have to half them again once they started seriously preparing for the impending era of bloodshed.

Sam once again took the lead of everything and laid a hand on Skeppy's shoulder. "Go to bed," he urged softly, slowly pulling him away from the maps. The sadness in his blackened eyes was just as strong as the one in Skeppy's own.

Antfrost held Velvet closer, wrapping his arms around him protectively and gently giving his cheek a few affectionate licks.

He knew that Bad and Skeppy never became anything more than very good and close friends, but it shouldn't have mattered anyway. A heart could still be broken regardless.

Sam then looked at Ant and his husband. "You should go to sleep too."

"So should you," the cat replied without missing a beat.

Sam looked tired, far more tired than everyone else was. Years had suddenly caught up on him, digging bags under his eyes and thinning the skin on his face. It wasn't a good look on him, and Ant couldn't even start to fathom what kind of a day he had been having.

"I will," Sam assured him. "I'm leaving for Snowchester soon."

Antfrost silently wondered if he'd even make it as far as the border before collapsing, in his state.

Sam urged Skeppy to his feet. Whatever burst of adrenaline that had shot through his veins was most definitely gone now, and he stumbled into the leader's arms in a trance.

Antfrost quickly grabbed Velvet's arm and led them out of the meeting room, down the dark hallway to their room. The cat let his husband go in first, then lingered by the doorway for a moment. He watched as Sam led Skeppy into Bad's room and stayed for a bit, likely helping him settle, then left and went to retrieve the heavy winter coat by the front door in preparation for his cold, dark journey up to the Northern lands.

Before he left, he looked back and caught Ant staring at him, and smiled. "It'll be alright, Ant," he said, "I swear."

His voice carried down the empty, thin air of the hallway and reached the cat's ears. Perhaps it was simply a deformation due to the distance, but not one of the words sounded sure of comforting.

Antfrost gave him half a smile and a nod. "Yeah," he lied along, "it'll be fine in the end."

There was something rotten in the SMP – or wherever Dream's undead army was camped.

As time went on, Purpled's suspicions about the whole thing only grew, as did his desire to do something about it. The army doubled in size with every passing day, and before long the entire mountainous valley was covered in tents. There was very little chance for any privacy, as prying ears and eyes lingered at every corner.

It therefore made it harder to keep to oneself, but also decidedly easier to become aware of others' thoughts and feelings, if one listened close enough.

No matter what Sheriff Thompson and his crew had said to him, not everyone seemed binded by a sense of gratitude towards the Nightmare. The few snippets of conversation Purpled had caught during purposely late night strolls helped ease some of his tension.

At least he wasn't the only one who thought that everything was an evil plan just waiting to hatch.

In fact, Purpled was surprised at how many there were that disagreed with Dream and Wilbur's leadership and morals – enough to fill several tents.

Enough to make a difference.

He had to act fast, and as discreetly as he could. He spent hours meticulously singling out the unsatisfied soldiers, and even more time trying to urge them away from everyone to offer them an alternative.

Of course, many still regarded him with fear, his close contact with the likes of Dream and Wilbur now news to everyone. Nevertheless, desperation took precedence over suspicions, and they agreed to meet with him.

Purpled had never planned an underground revolution before – if fact, he had never commanded *anything at all*. It was always him under his brother's thumb, or him alone. He had to be as careful as can be, and have all his wits about him.

He gave every interested warrior the date, time and place of the meeting, as well as a vicious threat for good measure if any of them dared let any secrets slip out to the maniacs that ran the army. It was a good start.

A good start that overwhelmed him when the time finally came to step up to his new role.

The gathering was held in perhaps the only place that Purpled deemed safe enough to do so: a cave only accessible by a small, narrow crack in the rockface just behind the waterfall that poured noisily into the lake. The path to get to it was slippery and neck-breaking, but the cavern itself was big enough to hold them all and any noise was covered by the gushing water outside. It was the best the hunter could find, and it had to be as perfect as possible.

Dream and Wilbur mustn't know about any of this.

If they did, it would be game over for all of them and this time, Purpled had a feeling that they wouldn't be revived. That, and he couldn't bear to drag anyone else down with him. It was *his* plan, *his* revolution, and he was going to take the full responsibility of its success, and potential fall as well.

The drops on the stalactite continued to drip. They ran down the smooth, bumpy surface of the limestone peak, pooling at the point and falling into a small puddle below.

Purpled had been staring at it ever since he shimmied his way into the cavern. The stalactite was huge, hanging against the back wall like the worn-down stone effigy of an ancient god, dripping rhythmically like an hourglass – or maybe even a ticking time bomb waiting for everything to inevitably explode.

When the time struck, he heard hushed whispers and soft-trodden footsteps flow in from the crack of cold night air. He still didn't turn around, but a chill ran up his back when the air changed. He was being watched. They were waiting for him to say something. They were waiting for him to lead them, something that the hunter was not entirely comfortable with doing yet.

He had always worked alone.

He wasn't ready for this.

He turned around, and was sick to his stomach.

All the people he had talked to were here, each of them as forgettable in face and figure as the last. Hybrids, humans and all in-between were crammed into the cave, some standing on the dusty floor, others were perched on the jutting stones of the slippery, humid walls.

So many expectant faces, so much hope. He didn't know if he could ever come close to providing that, to live up to their expectations. However, as he was always used to, he'd sure try his best, and he'd fight.

He cleared his throat and took a strong, grounded stance. A small pebble rolled out from under his boot, almost making him slip. He caught himself just in time, his narrowed stare sweeping the gathering and daring any one of them to make a comment about it.

When no one did, when the silence remained absolute, he took a deep breath and began.

"I called you all here for a reason."

With the first words out, he looked around again. Again, no one said a word or moved a muscle. All eyes were on him. He continued.

"This may seem strange. After all, we're all so different from one another – different species, different origins, different statuses, different factions, heck, even different time periods!"

The soldiers shared glances with each other, taking in appearances and details they had apparently never noticed about each other before.

"But despite it all," Purpled resumed, turning them all back to him, "one thing keeps us together, and that's a common goal, a common hate. That hate is of those bastards who run this place."

At that moment, the hunter couldn't help but snap. Bastards. That was far too kind a word for what they were.

He balled up one of his fists until his knuckles turned white, and pointed an accusing finger towards the cavern's narrow entrance.

Those deceptive, manipulative bastards.

A few of the souls present mindlessly glanced the way the hunter was pointed at, while others kept their eyes forward. Their acknowledgement was shown by sharp, earnest nods.

Purpled dropped his arm. "The SMP is your home, and sure, they want to give it back, but on the way they'll make you murder your brothers, sisters, parents, children, friends, anyone close to you that still breathes."

Punz.

"You'll have to tear them to pieces, and they'll be forced to do the same if we don't do something about it. Dream and Wilbur don't care about you – oh sure, they'll pretend they do, but they didn't revive you for your sake, they did it to force you all into grateful submission for their own gain. They won't blink as you cut down your own blood, and neither will any of the other soldiers because they're too starstruck by the grand gift of

life they bestowed upon them. You're not like them – you've understood what's right and wrong."

Would he have to face off against Punz?

He hurried to banish the thoughts he didn't want to process right then, and the image of his glorified mercenary of a brother who simultaneously inspired spite and a soft feeling akin to affection, perhaps.

"I can't promise a lot," he admitted out loud. "It'll be difficult: it will require all your wit, strength and courage to pull off, as well as a secrecy beyond anything you've ever known before. If... whatever *this* really is gets out and reaches Dream, the punishment won't be a simple scolding. It will be death. That, I *can* promise you. The door is there. Leave if you're scared, if you can't handle it, but be warned. One word about this to anyone outside of this cave will get your throat cut. I will make sure of that myself."

To cement his point, he drew his sword and presented it to the gathering, the murderous blade gleaming like a silver platter. He then stared at each of them in turn, taking in each individual's expression and, again, daring them to make a comment or defy his authority.

Again, no one did. No one even left, even if Purpled had just given them explicit permission to do so. They weren't scared, or intimidated by his harsh, bloody promise. Every single soul in the cavern stayed put, their gazes on the hunter.

On their leader.

And in all their eyes, Purpled could glimpse the furious devotion to their cause and the unquestionable loyalty he had wanted.

Their leader.

"Good, I'm glad we're on the same page." He hid his blade again, the sword sliding down into the sheath with a dangerously soft and clean hiss. "Now—"

"What's your plan, then, violet boy?"

A startled hush fell over the room, and something cold latched at Purpled's lungs. The crowd parted, and someone sauntered forward, slightly unsteady on his hooves and grasping a half-empty bottle in his hand.

"What are you doing here?" Purpled asked with a growl.

"Well, you seem pretty insistant about everything. Surely you have an idea of some sort."

The hunter lay his hand on the pommel of his sword. "I don't recall inviting you."

"What is this, a birthday party?" Schlatt climbed up onto the same promontory as the hunter.

The ram was slightly taller than him, and his magnificent curved horns pointed their sharp ends at his face like the fangs of a serpent. Eerily enough, he had reclaimed the cold, calm and calculated stance of the position that had been his fame and downfall. Purpled would have backed down if it wasn't for the other's gaze.

Schlatt's eyes were ones of a drunk, glassy and drowned in another world; Purpled knew that his own were clear and bright, with the sharpness of a predator. One was more aware than the other, therefore one had the upper hand.

Purpled puffed out his chest and squared up to the other. "What do you want?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Schlatt smirked, his grin hazy and lopsided. "I want to join you."

"Join us?" Now the hunter was growing even more suspicious. "Why don't I believe you?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Why *wouldn't* you lie?"

"Because I have something to gain from this, like you all do." The ram looked out over the ocean of heads that eyed him as warily as the hunter was. "Do you think I want to bend to Wilbur and Dream's wills again? Yeah, like I'm ever going to let that fucking happen again. If it weren't for them, my life would have been great. I would have *had* a life!"

In hindsight, driving the maddened dictator to an early grave was the best thing Dream and Wilbur had ever done.

Purpled didn't like the way the ram addressed the cavern – addressed *his* rebels, *his* revolutionaries. He was taking full control, and the hunter didn't appreciate that.

He quickly stepped in-between the ram and the people. "Nothing's stopping you from running away," he pointed out.

"I know," Schlatt agreed, "but you need help."

Purpled sucked in a deep, agitated breath. "Not from you."

"Especially from me."

"I don't see how you of all people can help us."

"You've got pretty words, kid, and a nice show of skills," the ram began, reaching up and pinching the hunter's cheek. Purpled would have slaughtered him right there if he wasn't curious enough to hear him out. "But you don't have what it takes to be a leader on your own. You're too much of a lone wolf."

He wasn't dumb. "I'm not handing over my command to you."

"And I'm not asking for it," assured the other. "No one'll trust me alone, and all this would be for nothing."

"What do you want, then?"

"Let me lead with you. You have the plan, I have the experience."

Purpled didn't know if he'd call the Manberg dictatorship 'experience' as such.

"We can be business partners, if you'd prefer."

"I don't think that's wise."

"Believe me, for all our sakes, it is."

Purpled looked at Schlatt's outstretched hand. Then, he glanced up for a second opinion.

His ragtag army was still staring solely at him. Some shifted uncomfortably, unsure pursed lips twisting their expressions awkwardly. However, most of the others gave the hunter small nods and blinks of approval, reluctant as they may be. In the long run, Schlatt was right: Purpled had no experience, and wasn't made to lead an entire revolution alone. No matter how questionable an alliance with the ex-dictator was, it would be useful to some degree.

And even if things with the ram did go south, Purpled could easily kill him before he even managed to tipsily grip a mere butter knife.

"Alright, fine. We have a deal."

Purpled shook Schlatt's hand. His palm was moist and clammy, dripping with sticky, slimy sweat that made the hunter's hairs stand up on edge. He withdrew as quickly as he could, discreetly wiping the residue off on his hoodie.

The smile Schlatt gave him was nothing less than unsettling. "I'm glad we could come to an agreement," he hummed, as if he was thanking another political ally for their generosity. "Now, I think we could start by thinking this all out in much more detail, don't you think?"

Purpled bit his tongue to stop himself from spitting out a sentence laced with venom, and simply nodded.

Silently, he began to wonder what new cataclysm he was leading both himself and his people into.

Chapter Seventy-Five: Fighting Alone

"What about the realms of Middle Earth, like Gondor, Rohan or Rivendell?" Tubbo began, looking at them each in turn. "Perhaps they could help!"

Eret shook his head. "The last I heard, the tensions were back between them all. We can't have entire armies that will refuse to cooperate with each other and fight among themselves rather than join against our enemy."

"And Narnia?"

"When the White Witch was defeated thousands of years ago, the piglins were part of the rare few who refused to pledge allegiance to the new Kings and Queens," explained Technoblade with a sigh. "They were banished back to the Nether, and all the portals in that realm were closed. The Narnians will flat-out refuse to fight alongside someone like me."

Karl nodded in agreement. "And Aslan comes and goes as he wishes," he added. "Even if we do get a message to Narnia in time, its armies will refuse to fight valiantly without the power of their lion by their side."

"The Hermits are far more skilled in building and redstone than in warfare," Sam blurted out, covering one of the maps with his large hand and hiding its contents from everyone's view. He even went as far as sliding it far away from them all. "I studied with them, and we can't pull them into something they have no relation to and have them all get cut down for nothing."

"I'm surprised no one has even suggested Stormhold—" Ant began to say, before being cut off by a wave of King Eret's hand.

"We have to face the fact that we're alone," the monarch said sternly, then leaned against the edge of the table.

Alone.

Now that single word was finally set free, it finally became real for all of them. Too real, in fact, and the silence that fell was far too loud, and filled by agitation. Ranboo's ears twitched.

King Eret sat down at the end of the long table, hands clasped against his forehead.

Beside him, Karl grabbed Sapnap's hand, keeping a high head and a straight face despite everything. His pearly gaze, still unseeing and pure, was focused on a spot in the distance. The fireborn pulled his beloved's head down into his shoulder and kept it there, gloved fingers stroking his hair comfortingly.

Sam stayed standing, hunched over the table with his eyes vaguely staring at the countless maps and papers strewn across it. Antfrost began to pace somewhere behind him, tail whipping back and forth and scrunching up his muzzle.

Technoblade lumbered behind Eret's chair and placed a heavy hand on the back of it, sharp nails digging into the wood and chipping the carved edges. He raised his gaze and looked straight at Ranboo.

The hybrid drew his gaze down to his hands. A healthy stack of spotless paper and envelopes sat before him, an ink and a quill not far either. They were meant to be decorated by fine, persuasive words and sent out to any allies, imploring them for their aid. With how the discussion was going, they were going to stay as blank as they were now.

A playful, good-natured arm nudged him. The hybrid looked up, and was met with Tubbo's smile. A smile that, just like everything else in the war room, was dark and gloomy.

"Well, that doesn't mean we're completely lost," the young ram said aloud, catching everyone's attention again. He stood up and Ranboo followed, hanging on to his arm. "The SMP is the biggest cluster of nations for oceans around!"

"And the one that has been through the most wars in recent years, and that has had the most losses," Eret sighed, shaking his head.

"But, I mean, think about it!" Tubbo continued. "Snowchester, the Badlands, the Greater SMP, Kinoko Kingdom, the Antarctic Commune, Las Nevadas and the Temple – you can't say that's nothing."

"Tubbo," Sam began in a soft tone, the one that Ranboo recognized as the low, intimate one he reserved for his family. "Eret's right. We've lost a lot."

He wasn't speaking to the ram as leader to leader, but rather as a father and a son. Tubbo seemed to know that too, his tense posture relaxing and somehow making him smaller than he was. "But—"

"Since the Red Banquet, the Badlands' list of able fighters has gone down considerably, and we're simply not enough to build an army able to make a difference."

"But what about—"

This time, it was Karl's turn to cut Snowchester's leader off. "Foolish said he'll spare some battalions," he said, "but since their... incident, the Temple has tripled every patrol and security measure."

"Fucking hell!" Tubbo cried, exasperated. He made Ranboo jump. "What the heck happened? What is Foolish, a fucking *god*, so scared of?!"

No one could give a clear answer – no one knew. But if Foolish's recent anger and seclusion from every and all international matters was anything to go on, it was something serious.

"Well," Ranboo piped up, trying to get the ball rolling again. "We still have Las Nevadas, don't we? That should count for something..."

"Or nothing at all," Techno grunted in disdain. "Quackity didn't even reply to the message."

They all looked at the empty chair at the table, reserved for the leader of Las Nevadas and again, everyone was hushed. The impending doom hanging over their heads fell just that little further down, the threat more real than ever.

"So, let's just, uh, go over our assets," Ranboo suggested, trying to sound professional.

On second thought, he couldn't have had a worse idea. The mere suggestion that they had any sort of advantage in this situation, in the oncoming Armageddon, was ridiculous. Ranboo might have very well worn a clown's wig and red nose and spout offensive jokes – he would have gotten the same, mirthless reaction out of them.

"We could bring in some withers—"

"No!" everyone else cried, horrified by Techno's suggestion.

"Well, why not?" he huffed, grunting.

Eret was the first to confront the piglin. "Because they're dangerous—"

"That's the point..."

"—and unpredictable," the king finished with a glare. "They're summoned to cause chaos, and they do just that. They don't care who gets caught in the crossfire. We're already so few, Techno. If anything from our side turns on us, we'd all be better off dead anyway."

At that, Technoblade sunk back, understanding overwhelming his features.

Ranboo opened his memory book and picked up his pen. "Um... What should I write down?" he suggested instead.

"That we're doomed," Eret whispered. "That we're well and utterly screwed..."

Ranboo stopped himself before he could scrawl anything down. The nib of his pen hovered in mid-air, dripping small specks of ink onto the empty page below.

Screwed.

They were screwed.

Or so they all seemed to be thinking.

The hybrid closed his memory book with a bang. "No, we're not screwed," he decided, sitting up straight.

No, they had a chance, a good, fighting chance. He just had to get them to see that. Yes, there were wars. Yes, lots had been lost. However, for once, Ranboo was thankful for his defective memory. He had a point of view none of the others had, which in cases like this one happened to be highly useful.

If he couldn't remember the past, then he could at least help plan the future.

"Ranboo..." Sam's soft, fathering tone was back and although the hybrid would have melted again, he instead stood his ground.

"No, we're not screwed," he reiterated, "or fucked, or anything else. We've got a good chance!"

"A chance?" Technoblade scoffed. "What chance? We're facing off against one of the nastiest pieces of work the world has ever seen with nothing but the rescapés of crumbling nations – no offense." He cast an apologetic look to his peers.

"None taken," Ant purred with a little smile, a smile that nevertheless took Techno's words to heart, as well as their truth.

"Dream is raising the dead – the dead!" the piglin continued, and that was the first time Ranboo had seen him well and truly scared. "How are we ever meant to compete with that? He could summon anyone back, anyone at all!"

Ranboo thought for a moment. "Well, we have a few things on him..."

"Like what?"

"Well, 'Technoblade never dies'. Therefore, he'll never have you." Faced with the warrior's taken aback stare, he turned to the others. "He doesn't have the greatest redstone Grand Master who built history's most brutal, indestructible prison. He doesn't have the fireborn who burned entire kingdoms and crimson demons to the ground. He doesn't have them."

He sat down again. One by one, the designated leaders began to perk up, looking at each other with expressions that the hybrid couldn't read for certain. They were either lighting up with hope, or with a fiery rage that would get him kicked out of the meeting.

Tubbo held his hand under the table.

"We've got assets he hasn't," he concluded, his tone a lot more quiet and strained than before.

"Listen, Ranboo," Antfrost began with a comforting purr, sitting down beside him. "I know you're trying your best, but—"

"He's right," Sam said, his eyes once again distant.

The cat snapped his head to him. "What?"

"He's right." Sam pushed himself up from the table. "He doesn't have the redstone knowledge. Even if he happens to have a hundred engineers on his side, he'll never have everything I know. I was trained as part of the elite for a reason. We'll always be ten steps ahead of him on that front."

"And the fire," Sapnap spoke up as well. "We could set a trap of some sort, or use it as a distraction."

"He still has the numbers," Techno reminded them.

"So what?" The fireborn rolled his eyes. "We all know you could take out twenty men on your own without breaking a sweat."

Dawn broke out over Techno's features. His ears pricked up, and an invisible symphony made them tremble, only audible to him.

The voices, Ranboo had to guess.

He had never seen Techno willingly sink into them before.

"That was an admirable pep talk, Ranboo," Eret thanked, breaking the thoughtful quiet, "and it did certainly raise some good points. However, we have to remember that we know so little about all of this as of now. Any concrete plan we could potentially make could crumble in the blink of an eye. We need solid foundations."

"And we'll get them in time," Karl assured them all, standing up and using Sapnap as support. His muddled senses from the shock of being blinded still hadn't untangled themselves completely, but his enthusiasm towards Ranboo's proposal was palpable. "But we can at least rest easy with the thought that we can start anticipating something."

"Build an artillery," said Sam.

"Strategize with the forces we have," continued Sapnap.

"Start training our troops," concluded Technoblade. "That should be enough to keep us busy until we get some more information."

"Because whatever happens," Ranboo said, his full attention on Eret and his skepticism, "we know that all of this will end in war."

No one had dared mention the three letter word until now, as inevitable as it was.

War.

That signed the agreement, and confirmed every suspicion. Their discussion was no longer one turned towards mere theories and speculation, potential threats and trying to investigate the supernatural musings relayed to them through a troublemaking boy and his surrogate father.

Now, they were real.

This is real.

We are at war.

"Eret, despite what we do or don't know, we need to prepare."

The monarch lingered for a while longer, hand drawn up to his mouth and grazing at his nails. He looked from one leader to the next, his eyes weighed down by the questions and worry that gnawed at them. He finally let his eyes fall on Ranboo.

"Fine," he finally agreed with a sigh. "It seems we have no choice, do we?"

"We don't," Tubbo confirmed with a sad nod.

"Alright." The monarch stood up, as did everyone else. "We all meet back here in a week to share progress reports."

The other let out mumbles and nods of agreement, and just like that, the meeting was over. Each nation reclaimed their maps and notes, and filed out of the room.

Only Eret and Ranboo stayed behind. The hybrid thought he dropped his pen, and was down on the floor on his hands and knees trying to search for it. He looked for an embarrassingly long time before realizing sheepishly that he had tucked it behind his ear.

"Ranboo?"

He snapped to attention, hitting his brow on the edge of the table as he rushed to stand up. "Yes, Your Majesty?" he asked, hissing and rubbing his head.

Eret tilted his head, observing him. His eyes were especially focused on his hands stained and scarred by battles, water, the spots he was given at birth and ink from his relentless writing.

"You're a good guy," the king finally said with a smile.

"Thank you." The hybrid beamed, and continued picking up his stuff. He also realized that Technoblade had forgotten his cape, so he went to retrieve it as well.

"You always seem to turn up in these sort of government meetings," the king piped up again, "and part of me is certain that it isn't just to reluctantly take notes."

Ranboo paused, then draped the winter cape over his shoulder and turned to Eret. "I do like writing," he agreed, "but I also like helping people, helping my friends."

"Helping nations and their leaders as well." He laughed. "As one of Technoblade's protégés, I'm surprised. I thought he would have drilled all that out of you."

The hybrid took a moment to think, to really think. It did seem weird, in hindsight. Training with an anarchist, and yet having great friends and allies in high positions of power.

"Technoblade took me in after Doomsday and taught me how to fight better," he said. "He didn't exactly force any of his philosophies on me. I mean, there are lots of things that governments do that I don't like, but that depends on who's running them. You're all good leaders, which I also think is why Techno is willing to help you."

King Eret seemed more than satisfied with the answer he was given. "You're very diplomatic, Ranboo. That's a good quality to have, and not many that sat around this table have it like you do. You're definitely one of a kind."

"What is this, a job interview?" Ranboo chuckled, nervously trying to deflect the compliments.

"Maybe," Eret smiled. "If you're interested, that is."

A job opportunity? In the palace? With the king?

Ranboo's ears pricked up. "What sort of job?"

"Oh, not much," the other assured him. "It'll revolve a lot around archiving and transcribing, as well as potentially becoming an advisor. I mean, if you'd want to—"

"That would be great," the hybrid said with a bright smile, not entirely thinking it all through yet. All he knew was that Eret was considering him competent enough to hire in an important position, and he was ready to latch on to any validation he could get. "It really would."

"Well, we could talk about it some other time," the monarch said breezily, standing up and starting to clear away the maps. "I don't want to keep you too long. After all, we're going to war. Let's just see how things stem from there."

The darkness leaking from his aura didn't escape Ranboo, but now his grin had broken out, it was impossible to hide. "Yeah, war," he echoed vaguely.

He bowed and made his way out, head still reeling from everything that had taken place – and strangely enough, not all of it was bad.

In fact, his faith in their strength and strategy was growing by the second. They could do and beat anything.

The door to the war room banged open, and the leaders began to file out – thank fuck for that. Tommy's ass and back were starting to get sore from hours spent sitting on a rough wooden bench and pressing his spine against the uneven stones making up the palace walls.

His neck hurt too from staring aimlessly up at the ceiling for so long as well. Perhaps he had brought that upon himself, however. When he did lower his eyes, he was met either by Philza's hunched up body and soulful blue eyes staring straight at him – which he hated – or Captain Puffy's frantic pacing – which only irritated him and made him jumpy.

As much as he loved Puffy, there was only one person in the corridor with them that he could stand, and that was Velvet. Tommy didn't know him well, except from Sam's occasional mentions of the Badlands' new members of government. He sat next to Tommy, and had brought along some complimentary pastries for the long wait. The boy was the only one that ate any, or rather all of them.

So his stomach was hurting now too, along with every other worried nerve in his body. Great. Fantastic.

"Well?" he asked.

He stared at the first two that emerged from the room, Sapnap, with Karl hanging off his arm. The air turned stifling, and it became hard to breathe. Tommy was hot under the collar, and silently cursed out Sapnap's stupid fire powers.

The fireborn shot Tommy a sideways glance, eyes burning. He shook his head with a defeated sigh, mirrored by Karl, and they walked right past him without a single word.

Rude.

Instead, he decided to hassle Technoblade who, unlike the Kinokians, flashed him a confident smile with a hopeful glint in his eyes. "So?"

The piglin rubbed his hands together and grunted, nodding slowly. "We're getting somewhere," was all he said, then swiftly strode away to join Phil.

Again, it wasn't the answer Tommy wanted, and although he had promised himself to keep his cool no matter what happened, he began to fume. He searched the hallway for someone much more open to his questions.

He found them in less than a split second, and rushed to their side. "Sam! Tubbo!"

His call also alerted Puffy, who trotted up to them by the boy's side. "How did it go?"

"Well, like Techno said, we're getting somewhere," Sam sighed, absent-mindedly coursing a hand through Tubbo's hair when the ram leaned against his side.

"To summarize," Tubbo said, "we're in deep, deep shit—"

"But?" interrupted Velvet, who lingered not far away with Antfrost.

"—but we might have a chance," the ram finished. "If we get our act together, that is."

Still, Tommy crossed his arms in front of his chest and huffed, "I still don't see why I couldn't come in too. I know more about this issue than anyone."

"Aw, Tommy," Sam chuckled lightly, and the boy's heart swelled, just happy that he could make him smile through the gloom. "I know, but Eret was really strict on who could or couldn't attend."

"What do you mean, 'strict'?" the boy protested, pointing at the lanky black and white figure that had just emerged from the meeting room. "Ranboo got to attend, and he's nothing!"

At the call of his name, the hybrid nervously shot the small group a look.

"No offense," Tommy added.

"None taken," his friend replied with a surprisingly mellow tone, and handed the heavy cloak slung over his shoulder to Technoblade.

"Do my eyes deceive me, or are you... happy?" Techno asked his student, quirking an eyebrow. Seems like Tommy wasn't the only one who had noticed the hybrid's strange attitude.

"Oh, it's nothing," Ranboo replied with a smile, sorting through his notes and shoving them between the pages of his journal.

"Mhm..." Techno sounded utterly unconvinced by the answer he got. With a flourish and a gust of heavy, velvet material, he clasped his cape back over his shoulders.

"But what did you actually decide on?" Puffy asked them all, her hoof tapping impatiently on the floor. "You were in there for hours."

Her gaze wandered over each of those concerned before finally landing on Sam who, once faced with the pressure of her insistence, cracked. "We're preparing for the worst."

"For war, you mean."

"For war," he agreed.

There it was, the thing that Tommy had been trying so hard to escape. His legs turned to jelly, his mind consumed by the dark red memories of fiery skies and blood-soaked earth.

"Hey, Tommy?" Tubbo's voice sounded so far away, as did Sam's when he approached him.

He could almost smell the smoke, feeling the silver coils of suffocation creep in and clog up his lungs.

"It'll be alright, I promise," Sam whispered. "No one will get hurt."

That was a lie if Tommy had ever heard one – and he had, each more serious than the last. Sam's voice pricked his ears like static, muffled and droning on like white noise. He subtly leaned into his touch and mumbled out a reluctant, "Yeah, poggers."

He wanted to believe his dad, but he knew he couldn't. That would end in denial and if Tommy had learned anything about turning a blind eye to Wilbur's dangerous self in times of war, it was that it would inevitably end badly.

"Now that's over and done with," Techno interrupted, shattering the tension, "maybe we could debrief and know exactly what we're meant to be doing."

Tommy scowled, but the piglin very obviously ignored him. The boy didn't expect him to offer any words of comfort, but he still thought that there would have been some sort of empathy.

But no; Tommy had Techno's allegiance, but he didn't exactly have anything more. It was strictly business. No thoughts or feelings, or anything akin to the warmth of their previous friendship.

"The Badlands will take care of the artillery," Sam said. "Our numbers may have declined, but many of those that remain have sharp minds and know how to work machinery."

"And with Snowchester's help, we could definitely build an empire," added Tubbo, to everyone's surprise. When faced with the stares, he elaborated. "What? Just because we live in the tundra like some sort of freaks doesn't mean we're useless. My arctic folk have some great skills that could be of use if they're given the proper chance to show them. Anyways, I've always liked dabbling in redstone here and there – I could definitely use this as a way to broaden my horizons."

Now, that was a way to suck up to their dad if Tommy had ever heard one, and unsurprisingly, it worked. Tubbo's bubbly and confident attitude, as well as his gleaming blue eyes that starkly resembled Puffy's and the endearing, jittery prancing very visibly struck Sam's heart and made him melt.

What a simp – and Tommy meant that with all the good-natured affection he had for his best friend.

"As long as your mother's alright with it," Sam chuckled softly, casting the captain a look.

"As long as it keeps you both out of trouble," Puffy replied.

Tubbo's face lit up with the dazzle of a thousand fireworks. "Awesome! Will we be building nukes?"

"Woah, hold your horses," Sam exclaimed with another grin and laugh. "Maybe not to that extent."

"Why not? That would be so cool: imagine Snowchester having nukes!"

"Considering the mischievous ram who's leading it, that would be the worst idea that I've ever heard."

"But it would be cool, right?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," Sam conceded, closing that conversation with what Tommy assumed was a well-rehearsed technique he had picked up only recently. "The coolest."

It was always strange to see Tubbo act so much younger than he really was. He was eighteen, for crying out loud – he was no longer a kid. He was almost a year older than Tommy himself, and yet the boy could easily forget that when watching him act so wholesome with his family. Tommy finally and fully realized how wonderful that kind of vulnerability could be.

"Great, so we've got some fancy weaponry," Technoblade interrupted again, like the bitchy, full of himself prick he was. "I'll get started on the troops." He looked around the hallways until his beady eyes landed on someone specific. "Velvet, are you free?"

"Um, yes?"

"Good. We can get started on your training. Meet us outside the White Mansion in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes?" Velvet spluttered. "How am I supposed to get there in ten minutes?!"

The piglin smirked. "You run," he replied simply, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "As I said, we're going to start your training. A good warrior needs speed and endurance."

"Yeah, but... In *ten*?! That's impossible!"

"Then I suggest you don't waste any time."

And with that, he marched out the front doors. A few moments later, Carl whinnied loudly outside and hooves thundered away, down across the drawbridge and off into the distance.

"I should follow," Philza said. "Make sure he isn't planning to blow the Badlands to smithereens while he's waiting."

He bid his adieus by shooting Velvet a reassuring, albeit amused, smile and Tommy a soulful stare. The boy turned his attention away immediately, plastering a furious scowl on his face.

"I..." Wings shuffled, and Tommy mentally dared Phil to try and touch him. "Yeah, I should go."

There were footsteps that followed the same direction Techno had taken, followed by a powerful gust of wind. Then, nothing, and the coast was clear. Tommy turned back to the others, relaxing his tense frown.

"Nine minutes remaining," Sam teased, glancing at his pocket watch. Tommy recognized it as the one he used often as the Warden, and privately, he wondered why the fuck he had decided to keep it.

Something snapped in Velvet, and he began to frantically throw off his coat, scarf, jumper and anything else that might hinder him in a race.

"Shit, shit, shit," he muttered, shoving the now empty basket of treats into Ant's waiting arms. "I'm not ready for this!"

The cat, ever loyal, stood back and became his personal coat stand.

"I'll take your shift at the bakery," Ranboo offered, trying his best to hide the snicker that Tommy could see seep out nonetheless.

Velvet thanked him with a hurried nod and finished dumping everything on Ant. He gave him a sloppy goodbye kiss that Tommy recoiled at – again, gross adult stuff the boy would never understand, nor would he ever want to. With one last comically hopeless stare of a man whose fate was sealed, Velvet bolted out of Eret's palace and towards the doors of Tartarus.

"Do you think he'll actually make it?" Sapnap asked with a grin, still at the door with Karl. The mood had become surprisingly lighter than it perhaps should have been.

"For his sake, I hope so," Ranboo replied, "or Techno will make sure that never happens again and he'll work it out of him."

"Normally, I'd be worried," Antfrost mewled, "but I feel like this is going to be hilarious, and I want to watch."

"So do I," Tubbo agreed, but before he could take a single step, Sam caught him by the hood of his coat.

"And where do you think you're running off to, young ram?"

"To watch Velvet go through the nine circles of hell," the other replied, matter-of-factly.

"Oh, really? I thought you wanted to help me with the redstone."

Tommy watched on, stifling a laugh, as Tubbo opened and closed his mouth a few times, trying to find a clever answer. In the end, all he did was let out a baffled "Did I? Can't recall." before attempting to make his escape again.

Eventually, it was Puffy who stepped in to save the day. "Come on, Sam. Let him go."

"You heard him too, darling. He's my irreplaceable artillery associate. He basically sold me his soul."

"All the more reason to let him have fun before you both spend days cooped up in a dingy workshop," the captain replied. "Who knows the next time any of us will be able to take a break."

Tubbo took that as permission. He beamed widely and straightened his back. "This is why Mum is so much cooler than you," he hummed, clicking his hooves playfully against the tiles.

Sam rolled his eyes, but as he lay them on the ram again, Tommy could see nothing but a deep fondness. It was an affection that never wavered, even when he turned them to Tommy.

If he wasn't trying to uphold his reputation as a fearsome Big Man in a time of war, Tommy would have run up and hugged him.

"What about you, Tommy?" he asked.

"What about me?"

"Do you want to come and see Techno beat the shit out of Antfrost's husband?" Tubbo offered, earning him a round of disapproving tuts.

Tommy didn't answer right away.

On one hand, spending time with Tubbo was nice, and he had a particular appreciation for one on one duels. In the few, far between memories of his happier childhood, he even remembered him and Tubbo begging to go and see one of the Championships and the legendary Blade's performance in them, unbeknownst to them that Techno was actually their guardian Phil's best friend.

However, that was exactly where the problem lay: Technoblade. Tommy really didn't want to spend any more time with that piglin that he actually needed too. Likewise, he didn't fancy hanging around Philza too much either. Then, Antfrost was also another small obstacle his mind couldn't really get around: despite the Egg being gone and Sam assuring him that the cat had changed, he was still the feline that had tried to murder and indoctrinate the masses. Even watching him converse softly with Sapnap by the door made him a little uneasy.

And then, the man of the hour, Velvet, seemed nice enough. Tommy decided to repay him for the tasty pastries by *not* witnessing his humiliation.

"I'm good," he finally said. "I think I'd rather get on with the battleplans or some shit..."

"Are you sure?" Sam checked again. "You can, you know."

"I'm certain," Tommy replied, a lot more firmly.

A flash of understanding crossed Sam's gaze. "Puffy and I are heading to the White Mansion anyways, you know."

Tommy kept a straight face, attempting to conceal the fact that his entire plan to just tag along to Snowchester with them and laze by the fire was crumbling. "Oh."

"You could always come to the bakery with me," Ranboo suggested brightly, putting one hand on the boy's shoulder. His tail curled around his leg, and Tommy began to wonder if he had altogether forgotten the concept of personal space. "I'm sure Nikki will be glad of the extra help, and it could be fun!"

Tommy had a feeling that Ranboo also knew of his hesitancy to walk into the belly of the Badlands. Sometimes he forgot everything, sometimes he held the entire knowledge and wisdom of the universe itself. It was fucking creepy, and Tommy was never ready for it.

"I don't know, Boo... Nikki might end up chopping my head off by the end of it, and I kind of need this noggin' if I'm to create a masterplan to kill Dream."

"We could throw any leftover eggs at Jack Manifold."

"Done."

"Tommy!"

"What?" the boy protested when faced with the adults' reprimanding stares. "He stole what was supposed to be my thriving hotel and he's been a shit ever since."

"Even so, Toms," Sam sighed, leaning towards him. "You've got to think these sorts of situations through. For example—" He smirked. "—I don't recall you asking if anyone else wanted to settle their differences with that bald idiot. Make sure one of those eggs is from me."

"Sam, don't you dare encourage him," Puffy snapped, whacking the back of his head.

"Well, you heard the King of the Badlands, Captain," Tommy laughed. "Can't exactly refuse."

Sam pulled away, a little more solemn than his previous quip made him out to be. He looked like he wanted to say something, but the words never left his mouth and never reached Tommy's ears. For a moment, Tommy's whole body was washed over by a cold wave, and he wondered if he had fucked up in some way.

Instead of reprimanding him, however, Sam simply chuckled and shook his head. "He's right, Puffy. He can't refuse, by royal decree."

"Royal decree, my ass," she muttered back, shaking her head.

"I could tell him off, if you'd prefer."

The captain sighed, and smiled. "You boys do whatever you want. Just don't come crying to me when you get arrested or something."

"Arrest them? Why would I arrest them for obeying *a royal decree*—"

"Don't you start," Puffy warned playfully, elbowing Sam in his stomach. "You need to start deciding if you really are a king or not."

In the midst of their bickering, Tommy and Ranboo finally found their chance to escape.

"We'll see you at dinner!" the boy yelled, dashing out of the castle door with his hybrid friend hot on his heels.

Life inside the palace's ramparts was moving on with a usual, calm beat. The castle staff milled around with baskets of food and handfuls of tools, soldiers patrolled the towers and door, and the courtiers strolled elegantly through the few, flowering and well-tended pastures.

Eret clearly hadn't made the announcement yet. Tommy didn't know when or where he would, but he was certain that it would come in due time.

They were at war, and yet life still went on.

He stopped in his tracks, blocking the path of a haughty cook who grumbled and cursed him under his breath.

Ranboo skittered to a halt somewhere beside him. "What's up?"

"It just feels so... normal," Tommy replied, looking around. "It shouldn't be. Everything's gone to shit."

"They just don't know yet."

"Wow, no shit Sherlock."

"I'm just saying."

"Yeah, but still." They started walking again with a much more moderate pace. "It's just strange."

Ranboo hummed in agreement, and they didn't say anything for a hot minute. They kept their eyes forward and their feet light.

Further in the distance, strolling along the Prime Path, Tommy could just make out Antfrost and Tubbo making their way to the Community House. There was no sign of Karl or Sapnap, which immediately prompted Tommy to leap to the worst conclusions. They included, among others, death, dismemberment and politically motivated kidnapping.

Then, he remembered that Kinoko Kingdom was south of the Greater SMP and not north, which then in turn reluctantly brought him to terms with the fact that he would need to brush up on his geography.

Especially now they were at war, a fact that the boy could not stress enough.

As they strolled under the stone gateway, Tommy looked up. The portcullis above was shrouded in shadow, but still very much there. Its sharp teeth glimmered like arrowheads, ready to crash down on his head at a single notice.

He was relieved when Ranboo pulled him away, and before he could make a comment about anything, Tommy spoke up. "I do feel sorry for Velvet," he admitted. "And the future troops too, for that matter."

"We can look on the bright side though," Ranboo pointed out, falling into a little, brisk walk and a happy hum.

"What bright side?"

"If he's going to train the armies like he trained me and Velvet, then we're going to win, hands down."

If Technoblade ever had trained entire armies before, then Tommy was certain they would have all heard about it. After all, there was no way that any war he would have fought with countless battalions under his name wouldn't have ended in a bloody massacre.

The prospect made Tommy shiver. They *could* win, but at what cost?

Purpled wasn't a leader, although many seemed to think that he was. First, the rebel soldiers under his command said so. Now, the actual forces of authority did too.

When he had first received the message for the meeting, carried to him by a jumpy wisp of a soldier, his blood had run cold.

It had been a direct message from Dream himself.

His first dreadful thoughts had been that someone had betrayed him, that he had been mistaken about the loyalty of the fighters he had spent so long scoping out to join him. Nevertheless, if he had to die, he'd rather do it with his head high, even if his skin crawled with the unshakable feeling of the bright, red paint that marked him as a traitor to all he crossed paths with in the camp.

Schlatt was there too, waiting just outside the meeting place. "For one heck of a fighter, you're pretty slow," he teased once the hunter got closer.

Purpled scowled at him. "Pardon me for not wanting to rush head on to my execution," he snapped back.

"Execution? What execution?"

"What do you mean, 'what execution'?! Isn't it obvious?" He eyed the flask in the ram's hand, and sighed. "Nevermind, I guess it's not to you."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

The hunter's arm itched to shoot out and grab him by the collar. "If your drunken ass reveals anything that could cost us, you can bet that I'm going to beat you up for eternity."

Schlatt smirked. "I've been drinking regularly since I was your age, kid. It'll take more than a few bottles to get me to spill shit. Now, relax – if someone's acting suspicious here, it's you."

Then, he pulled aside the flaps of the tent and ventured inside. Purpled lingered a little longer outside, tapping his foot and cursing out the ram's indifference to everything. Nevertheless, maybe Schlatt was right – tension only brought along suspicion. He took a deep breath, letting the cool, fresh air of the mountains fill his lungs and calm his nerves, and entered the tent.

The tent itself was more of a large pavilion made of dark green material, most likely clumsily dyed by some of the artisans in their midst with what they had on hand. The canopy above was held up by two carved tree branches. While it would have normally contained an assortment of royal furniture and luxuries, this tent seemed to have been specifically set up as a base of operations, a war room. Various weapons lay in the corners and spilled out of open chests, animal furs matted with muddy footprints carpeted the floor, and a large table took pride of place in the center.

"Ah, Purpled," Dream greeted. "So happy you could make it!"

The hunter gingerly took a step forward, and gave those present a small nod of reluctant respect. "You did ask for me," he reminded them.

A minute or so in and they hadn't pointed a sword at his neck yet. That was reassuring.

"Still, I'm happy you agreed to come." Dream lifted his mask slightly, just enough so Purpled could see his smile. Again, it was a genuine one that made him shiver. Dream let his mask fall, and his honest grin was covered by a fake one, simplistic and fear-inducing. "Take a seat."

There were five of them, three of which were already occupied. One, by Dream's own cloak, bow and quiver of arrows. The second, by Schlatt, who seemed far too at home for his own good. The third was home to a man shrouded in a cloud of smoke, arm still bandaged up and bright eyes scrutinizing the hunter's every move.

"Hey, Purpled," Wilbur waved, winking.

The hunter refused to reply, and opted for the seat next to Schlatt. There was one more empty chair facing him, and he briefly wondered who it could have been meant for. Visibly, for someone who wasn't there, and wouldn't turn up anytime soon from the way everyone brushed the absence aside.

"Not very talkative today, are you?" Wilbur tutted, taking another long drag from his fag.

Again, Purpled didn't answer, but gave him a killer stare before looking down at the maps covering the table.

"Oooh, I think the kid's mad at me..."

Dream's hands suddenly came down on the table – not enough to make it shake or buckle, but enough to draw the man's attention. "Wilbur, apologize."

He spluttered. "What?"

"Apologize."

"Apologize? To whom? For what?"

"To Purpled," Dream said, calmly gesturing the hunter's way. "Apologize for trying to publicly humiliate him."

Purpled shifted awkwardly at the Nightmare's words. Apologize for simply humiliating him, *not* for almost killing him.

Wilbur scoffed and gestured to his bandaged arm. "Yeah, he's *such* a defenseless kid. Look at what he did to me!"

"You're lucky that he's such a good fighter, otherwise things would have ended very differently. He could have *died*, Wilbur."

"You could have just revived him."

"With what, exactly? His totem has been used, there was only a slim chance he'd actually come back as a ghost, and the other methods are out of the question. You know that."

Wilbur held Dream's gaze for a second or two. He took off his spectacles and cleaned them on his jumper. "I was just giving him a backbone."

"He's got one, Wilbur, and you don't have to attempt to murder him to see that. Purpled is nothing like Tommy. You need to get that into your head, alright?"

Being talked about like he wasn't even there, as if he couldn't defend himself, as if he was a *child*, made Purpled boil with rage. He made his presence known again by sitting up straight and tense, trying to fill the room despite the fact that he was shorter, younger and all around less intimidating than any of the other men present.

"Apologize, Wilbur." This time, Dream's tone had a dangerous edge to it. It was a warning, and with multiple weapons easily within his reach, the Nightmare had never seemed more terrifying.

Wilbur Soot took the remaining stub of his homemade cigarette out of his mouth and put it out on the edge of the table, leaving a dark, ashen mark. He looked up and crossed Purpled's gaze. His overall expression seemed genuine and serious, but the occasional, mocking glint still flashed across his eyes.

"I apologize, Purpled," he said, and that was that. No elaboration, no plead for forgiveness. Nothing. Wilbur leaned back.

"Well, Purpled?" probed Dream.

Now feeling a little more confident that he wasn't about to die, Purpled nodded. "He apologized," he agreed. He would only forgive Wilbur if he well and truly begged for it.

"Good. Now that's somewhat settled, we can finally get down to business."

What business, Purpled didn't know, but it must have been important enough to drag all four of them, friends and rivals, into the same tent. Now he had found his voice, however, he was set on using it.

"I'm a little out of the loop," he admitted.

"So am I," Schlatt followed, raising a questioning hand.

Dream nodded, his mask flashing them the only smile they could see. "I'm well aware of that."

"So?" huffed the ram. "Spit it out."

"Fucking hell, Schlatt," Wilbur groaned, rolling his eyes, "don't you know how to be patient?"

"More than you, fuckboy."

"Language, please," Dream demanded, his fist landing heavily on the table and startling them all. "I was about to get to that, if you'd kindly shut up."

"Be my guest," Schlatt muttered, reeling back.

"Thank you." Dream straightened his posture and composed himself. Calm, collected, and terrifying. "We have an army, and we're going to march on the SMP."

"Why?" Purpled couldn't stop himself from blurting out.

But the Nightmare clearly feigned to have not heard him, and continued. "We have the numbers, that is unquestionable, but history has also shown that it takes more than that to win a war. That's where we come in."

"As a war council?" interrupted Schlatt.

"As generals," Dream corrected. "Leaders, even. You're all indispensable."

He began to single them out one by one.

He pointed at Wilbur. "Charisma and organization," he said.

Then at Schlatt. "Brutality and authority."

At Purpled, who desperately tried not to flinch under his scrutiny. "Warfare."

And finally, Dream placed his hand over his own chest. "And finally, strategy."

He was perhaps being a little too modest. Purpled was certain that Dream could take full command and excel in every single one of the mediums he had just listed.

"You have built your reputations on your strengths, so much so that everyone forgot your weaknesses. You're powerful in your own way, and together, we could make the gods themselves shake in their boots."

"You make *us* sound like gods," Wilbur pointed out with a chuckle and despite his resentment for him, Purpled couldn't help but agree.

And eerily enough, it was invigorating.

"There is perhaps only one domain in which we are weak," Dream continued.

"And that is?"

"Redstone."

"Redstone?" Wilbur fell about laughing, for real this time.

"You think that's funny?"

"No, no, not at all!" The man composed himself, an amused smirk still lingering. "But let's be honest, Dream: I'm certain that with over a thousand years of knowledge held in our soldiers, we could manage."

"That's where you're wrong, Wilbur," Dream reprimanded. "We're talking about machines and inventions far more difficult and intricate than simply hooking up a button to some TNT. We were meant to have someone fill that role."

Purpled noted the slight turn of his head, and he followed Dream's masked gaze as it landed on the empty chair in their midst. Now, its vacancy made a little more sense.

"Should we bother asking for details?" the hunter asked.

"It's a long story."

That was the answer he had been expecting, and so he backed down.

"Let's just say that I should have killed him immediately when I had the chance," Dream said, his tone bitter. "Because either he's still alive, or his soul is somehow gone for good. Either way, he won't be fighting for us."

"If you're talking about who I think you're talking about," Schlatt ventured, "then he *was* very much alive, and a certain sheep seemed awfully desperate to save him."

"That still doesn't mean anything," Wilbur huffed.

"Oh believe me, it does," the ram said sternly. "If there's one thing I know about Puffy, it's that she gets what she wants."

Purpled perked up. Puffy?

"Captain Puffy breaking into Pandora's Vault after I threw away the keys?" Dream asked with a raised eyebrow. "That's unlikely."

"I gave her the keys."

"You *what*?"

"Listen, if she wants to go whore herself out to the first guy who tells her she has pretty little eyes, then that's her problem. I don't care anymore."

"Schlatt—"

"What? Are you jealous that your ex-warden is getting more action than you?" Dream groaned out a reply, which Schlatt quickly deflected. "In my defense though, I didn't know you wanted Sam's help."

Dream let out a long, ragged breath and dragged a frustrated hand under his mask

At first, Purpled hadn't wanted to be a part of this mysterious meeting, but now he was here, he began to realize what a gold mine of information it was. He was uncovering so many more useful details, notably why Dream had been so desperate to find a specific totem in the chapel that one evening.

But something else had lit a light in the dim part of his mind that held past memories.

Captain Puffy.

Before he could ponder the connection any longer, Dream came back to himself again. "Right, on that note, would anyone like a drink?"

Without waiting for an answer, he walked over to a bottle and some glasses sitting on top of a small stool. He took them and headed back to the table, popped the cork, and began to pour the wine.

As the glasses were passed around, Purpled felt sick to his stomach, and refused. "I don't drink."

"Yeah, *Dream*," Wilbur tutted in a sickly-sweet voice, taking a small, polite sip of his own. "He's just a kid."

Purpled stared daggers at him. "Actually, it's to keep my senses sharper."

"He's got a point," Dream mumbled. The hunter noticed how his grip on the bottle was tight, channeling inevitable anger, but he tried to keep his tone light. He poured himself a glass too, but didn't touch it.

The only one who did seem to enjoy the beverage to its fullest, unsurprisingly, was Schlatt. He downed his glass in one go and smacked his lips, eyes glistening in drunken satisfaction.

"This is good shit," he commented, gleefully snapping his fingers for the bottle.

Dream handed it over. "That's the only way I figured I could get you to stay."

"Smart move." The ram poured himself another glass, and chugged it just as quickly.

"I did mean to ask though, Dream," Wilbur said. "Where do we get half of this stuff? The tobacco, the alcohol, the blacksmiths' tools and all that. There's no way anyone managed to conjure all that out of thin air."

"I made a trade deal with a nearby town," Dream explained, gesturing vaguely out of the tent to somewhere in the distance, past the mountains. "They're pretty secluded from everything and know nothing of me or what we're doing here. I told them we're an army sheltered in the mountains in need of basic necessities and kindness, and they were eager to help."

"For free?"

"Of course not. I've written all our expenses down on a hefty IOU."

"So you've put us in impossible debt?"

"Don't worry. I told them I have a plan to pay them in full sometime in the future."

"And will they ever get paid?"

"That all depends on Eret's willingness to hand over the keys to the Greater SMP's treasure trove after their inevitable defeat."

Dream and Wilbur burst out laughing, clinking their glasses together and raising a toast to their victory. In any other situation, Purpled would have been all for their blatant confidence in their skills. But with so much at risk and his rebellion well and truly underway, he didn't share their enthusiasm.

"Ah, that reminds me!" Dream set down his glass and rubbed his hands, turning everyone's attention back to the table. "I think I've scoped out the perfect battlefield."

"Oh?" Wilbur also discarded his drink and leaned forward. "Do tell."

Now that the conversation was turning back to useful information, Purpled lent an attentive ear and a careful eye.

Dream spread out the maps in front of him. "Those village cartographers have no idea how valuable the information they're selling is," he said. "I spent a whole day combing through what they gave me and I found it. So then I bought every copy of this same terrain that they owned, and here we are."

The battlefield had already been chosen – now *that* was interesting.

Purpled cast a brief eye over the papers, trying to seem confused or vaguely uninterested. He had to stay relaxed, just as Schlatt had said. He didn't want to seem too eager to go into detail yet.

However, his head was screaming in triumph. He had hit the jackpot.

If he could only get his hands on one of those maps. Even just one could play a huge part in his revolt. Just one...

Something fell with a thunk.

"*What the fuck?!*"

"*Schlatt!*"

Purpled snapped back to the meeting, just in time to see a dark puddle of burgundy red liquid trickle across the table.

"Oops," Schlatt hummed, "my bad."

All at once, they lunged to try and save the maps.

"You *idiot!*" screeched Wilbur, hands groping the sopping wet rags. "You dumb fucking prick!"

"Is there anything that you don't mess up?" Dream snapped, his tone and movements a lot more controlled than Wilbur's. While the ex-president of L'Manberg's anger was hot and fiery, Dream's was sharp and cold, a growing irritation that was just about to make him snap.

"Look, I said I was sorry," Schlatt huffed, pushing the bottle off the table and idly sliding some of the papers off the table. "Accidents happen."

Then, he stared straight at Purpled.

The hunter paused what he was doing, hands and sleeves soaked with the wine, now looking far more like blood. He caught the ram's insistent gaze, stern and far more focused than it had ever been before.

At that moment, Purpled *knew*.

He knew what he was meant to do.

He also knew Dream was wrong: there were some things that Schlatt *didn't* mess up.

As Dream scrambled to find something they could use as a towel and Wilbur tried to stop the wine flow, Purpled's hand dove underneath the piles of papers, to the maps that hadn't been touched yet. With a clumsy display of sleight of hand that seemed to go unnoticed, he snagged one, rolled it up, and slipped it up his sleeve.

He glanced at Schlatt, who gave him a small nod and went to help Wilbur. Purpled cleared his throat, and sponged up the accident with a raggedy old blanket Dream had tossed him.

"So," he ventured, trying to seem inconspicuous. "Why did you choose that terrain specifically?"

To his surprise, despite the chaos, Dream answered him. "For a number of reasons. First of all, it's at an equal distance between us and the SMP – and we want to give them some sort of chance – then..." He trailed off, raising one of the drenched maps up and watching in horror as it dripped over the rest. "Ah shit..."

"Are they ruined?" Wilbur asked.

"No, but they're too wet to do anything worthwhile on, and the whole place is going to stink if we don't clear it up, and... *Fuck*. We're going to reschedule this meeting for another day."

"Without any wine next time?" Schlatt helpfully offered, his voice thrumming with an obvious, teasing undertone that didn't escape Purpled – dare he say, even made him smile.

"*Especially* without any wine," Dream scowled in the ram's direction. "Now shut up, get your act together and help me dry these out."

"I think a thank you is in order."

"I already did."

"No, a proper thank you, not that pathetic excuse for one you flung at me in passing. Look me in the eyes, and smile."

Purpled looked away from the map, annoyed at the fifth distraction in less than ten minutes. He stared at Schlatt, who smirked back with an obvious, narcissistic pride.

"Thank you, President Schlatt," the ram cooed.

"Thank you, President Schlatt," Purpled mimicked in a high-pitched, sing-song voice.

"I don't see a smile."

"Fuck you."

"Close enough."

The hunter rolled his eyes and went back to the glittering jewel they had salvaged. In his hands lay the key to their successful revolt and, dare Purpled say, Dream and Wilbur's downfall.

The map he had stolen resembled all the others that had lined the war pavilion's table, therefore making its disappearance so much harder to take note of. It was intricately drawn on thick parchment with black ink and what must have been a thin, precise quill. Clearly etched out by someone with far too much time and talent on their hands, the map was incredibly detailed.

"Alright, so we've got it," said Schlatt, "now what?"

"We look," replied Purpled, and peered closer. The terrain itself was unmarked and unnamed, but parts were still oddly familiar to the hunter. "I think that's the moorland on L'Manberg's western border."

"Shit, how the fuck do you know that?"

"First of all, it's big and hilly enough. Second of all—" He pointed to a small, round tower with the words "Watchtower" written underneath.

"So that village Dream trades with knows about the tower, but they don't know anything about the SMP."

"Maybe they just never went past there." Purpled drew Schlatt's attention to the middle part of the map, the main focus of it.

Most of the parchment was taken up by a large expanse of grassy fields, bordered by high mountains, that sloped down and created a flat-bottomed bowl.

The perfect battlefield, although the ram didn't seem to get it.

"I don't see what's so special about that place," he sniffed.

"It's got everything," the hunter explained, and began pointing things out. "A flat battlefield, a forest, and it's surrounded by cliffs."

"So?"

"So," Purpled insisted, more exasperated than he let slip, "that means that once anyone charges in, they won't be able to scramble out in time in the heat of battle." The realization made his skin crawl. "No one will be able to get out. Everyone's going to be forced to fight to the death until there's a winner."

After a moment of dawning horror, Schlatt whistled. "Dream's fucked up," he tutted.

"He's smart," Purpled corrected. "Insane, but smart. He's learned that giving people ultimatums never ends well for him. He's planning to end this once and for all."

"And what are we going to do about it?"

"Try and stop him." Purpled scrutinized the map again, eyes lighting up when he spotted a narrow chasm leading off from the main field. "We could use this."

"It's a dead end."

"Exactly! We could section bits of the army off and slaughter them."

"Yeah? And what will you do with the bodies?"

Purpled faltered.

"And also, it would be pretty fucking strange if half the army goes missing. Dream and Wilbur would notice."

He didn't know what to say.

"And then, of course, what do you do if the SMP gets led into the trap? What then?"

"Stop." Purpled's head was reeling. "It was just an idea."

"Well you might want to think of another one," Schlatt shrugged.

The hunter looked back down at the map again. "We could always, uh—"

"No, not now. We've got the map, and that's great. Now we just need to attend a few more of these meetings and bide our time, alright? Here." He handed his flask over.

Purpled didn't drink, but now he was aware of the crumbling exhaustion taking over his body, he gave in. He rolled up the map – sparing one last glance for the impasse he had been so excited about – and snatched the bottle. He took a swig, the bitter alcohol burning his throat. He didn't want to know what it was, he just knew that it was vile.

He handed it back with a cough, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and leaned back against the cold stone wall. The stalactite continued to drip, to count down the seconds like a clock.

Drip, drop.

Tick, tock.

The explosion was drawing nearer.

"Hey, Schlatt?"

"Hm?"

"I think I remember something about my death."

"Good for you," the ram replied, in a mundane, uninterested tone.

He may not give two shits about the hunter's thoughts, but he seemed to be at least giving him the leeway to ramble on about them.

Purpled arched his neck towards the ceiling. More stalactites stared back, hanging over his head like sharp, dangerous swords, ready to impale him at the slightest rattle of the mountain chain.

"It has something to do with Captain Puffy."

"Puffy, eh?" Schlatt had perked up a little.

"Yeah, I think... I think I was trying to kill her."

"Now why the fuck would you do that?"

"I don't remember exactly, probably a client's order."

"And she's the one who killed you?"

Purpled hesitated. "I don't know."

A hearty pat on his back startled him and snapped him back out of his thoughts. "Well, you're probably looking into this too hard," the ram groaned, hoisting himself to his feet and tottering towards the exit. "Sleep on it, and you'll realize what a waste of time it was to wonder."

"You seem to know a lot about her," Purpled ventured, stopping Schlatt dead in his tracks. "Maybe you can enlighten me."

"Listen, kid," the ram muttered, not even turning around to face him. The hunter did take note of how his ears drooped. "Whatever happened between us two is in the past now, get it? Don't fucking ask me again."

Then, he wandered out, leaving Purpled alone in the cave filled with his thoughts and the loud, echoing dripping. Maybe the ram was right; maybe he was just looking into things too much.

He took the map and stuffed it securely back into his purple sweatshirt. Then, shifting into a more comfortable position, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

His dream was a very strange one.

He was chasing a white and brown shadow through a birch forest that never seemed to end. Everything seemed too loud, too fast, and too heavy, and his strained gasps of air echoed unpleasantly in his ears.

A crack of lightning resonated once as blades clashed, and then once again as the trees around him splintered.

Suddenly, he was falling, swallowed up by the bowls of the forest floor.

A woman screamed his name.

And the world went black.

Chapter Seventy-Six: Two Armies, Both Alike In Dignity

Before proceeding to the chapter, I have a small message I would like to share.

I'm sure that what I'm about to talk about next won't be news to anyone.

Recently, Technoblade's channel uploaded for the last time, announcing that Techno himself has unfortunately and shockingly passed away from his long battle with cancer.

I am not ashamed to say that I burst into tears multiple times since the announcement, and probably will following this message.

I am vastly aware that the relationship that we've formed as an audience with him is largely parasocial, but it was still a meaningful one nonetheless, and one that has been a hugely important part of my life in recent years.

Technoblade has and always will be an important part of the Minecraft community, YouTube, and entertainment in general. A comedian, a skilled player of god-like proportions, a memer, a nerd like us...

Just, everything that made him *made* him.

And to suddenly lose all of that...

My condolences go out to all his family and friends, who need all the support and love they can get in these horrible, dark times.

I will continue to write, although it will definitely be a lot harder now. Technoblade has always been one of my favourite characters from the SMP to write, draw and just to always have lurking in my mind.

Now he's passed, there's a void when I do any of those things, and it's strange. I don't think that will ever go away. The feeling may lighten, but it won't go away for good.

I've had a couple of projects with Technoblade's character in mind, and you know what? I'm going to go through with them.

Because if there's one thing that we should never forget, it's that "Technoblade never dies".

He will never die out in reputation, appreciation, memory, or in any other way. And if writing silly little stories is going to keep his legacy going then *goddamn!*— I'm going to keep writing silly little stories!

Legends never die, and the love we keep putting into their depictions, both in artistic mediums or simply from word to mouth, are a good part of the reason why.

Memory is a powerful thing, no matter how you choose to fuel it.

I salute you, Technoblade, for all you are and were: an inspiration, a comedian, a muse, a gamer, a nerd, a storyteller, an actor, and one of the bravest pigs we've ever known.

Blood for the Blood God.

I hope God hesitated, just as you said you wanted him to.

And with that, my author's dedication goes out to you, with all my heart.

Iphiko

The hardest part of the war preparations was perhaps the wait.

Days whizzed by, progress was made, and the allied nations grew stronger, but there was never a light at the end of the tunnel. A light or, just as likely, an explosion.

They waited and waited, and for a few weeks, nothing did appear. They could have brushed the troubled times aside as just a one-off fear, and get on with their lives.

They all knew better, however. The wait would seem like the longest part, until it would actually come to an end. Then, they'd all realize how truly short it had been – and come to terms with the fact that they weren't ready.

They made the most of every second.

First of all, the armies were trained.

The nations grew used to Technoblade and occasionally Philza's imposing figures weaving in and out of their borders, armed to their teeth and barking at the conscripted soldiers like hardened generals that had been doing so their whole life.

They had gotten themselves into a bit of a rhythm of late. They went to a different nation every day, accompanied by one of its leaders, and set a strict training schedule from morning until the moon was high in the sky, sometimes beyond if they weren't satisfied with the results.

The Badlands, the Greater SMP, Kinoko Kingdom and Snowchester all received the same treatment. Then, when their list was checked off, they'd start over again.

The Blade and the Angel of Death knew exactly what they were doing.

Techno trained the majority of the warriors, but left the winged ones to Phil. His fellow avians had become so used to the battles raging on the ground that they had all forgotten what it was like to fly and taste the skies. Philza made them remember, and took the air force under his own black wings of feathers and metal.

They made the future troops run, climb, spar and work on their concentration, enhancing each nation's respective strengths and patching up their weaknesses – and every nation had them.

The Badlands had the problem of their numbers. Three quarters of their population had been infected and had disappeared. Half of those who remained were solicited for the redstone artillery. Even with the added volunteers sent by Foolish, they barely had a full battalion to their name.

The Greater SMP too had the problem of numbers, though on a completely different scale. As the biggest and most populated nation in the SMP, they had a lot of soldiers, maybe even too many for Techno and Phil to train properly.

The Kinokians were too peaceful, more than anything. The people lived away from most of the battles, in a magical forest with heads full of mushrooms, silks and the old pages of fantasy books, and lacked the raw brutality needed for the upcoming wars.

And the inhabitants of Snowchester, the stark opposite of Kinoko Kingdom, were far too aggressive. As a young nation made up of many of L'Manberg's fierce, grudge-holding citizens, led and fuelled by Tubbo's warring and starry-eyed deposition, their desire for blood was enough to rival all its other allies. It also didn't help that many of them still didn't entirely trust Techno and Phil, making the training somewhat difficult.

However, for every disadvantage, there were a few clear skies that did spark hope.

Snowchester's people, for example, were tougher than others. Their rough tundra home had rendered them practically immune to the cold, heavy snow, or any other elements that were flung their way. They had the drive, they had the stamina to face off against whichever terrain they were thrust into.

Kinoko Kingdom was perhaps the most strategic of them all. With thousands of years of ancient knowledge passed down to them in their numerous books, they all shared a mystical wisdom that surprised even the immortal Philza. No wonder Sapnap had been so eager to start developing strategies and traps. His input during the training sessions showed just how attentive and versatile his people were when it came to organization and commands. As a final note, yes the Kinokians were softer than their counterparts, but that meant that they would be least likely to pull disloyal attacks on their adversaries or initiate genocides on the battlefield.

The Greater SMP's main weakness was its numbers, but it also ironically was its greatest strength. Even if the people wouldn't have been trained properly – which would not be the case, they would be given the same treatment as everyone else, Techno reassured Eret – their numbers would be enough to make any army tremble. Waves and waves of their soldiers would be a huge advantage, especially when faced with the countless living dead Dream had resurrected. They were numerous and willing enough to put up one heck of a fight for whoever dared cross them.

Finally, the Badlands were few, but they were fierce. Strongly welded and bonded together by the camaraderie that the Eggpire's tyranny had put in place, they were ready to lose all their lives rather than have a friend taken in their place. That undying loyalty to their comrades was something that none of the other nations had as strongly as the Badlands did, and the way it egged them on impressed the two members of the Antarctic Commune to no end.

With that ferocity came the enthusiasm to learn, and with that, a rapid progress in some of the newer fighters. Storms no one even knew were there had been unleashed, in flurries of blades and calculated, almost dancing steps.

"Good, Velvet, good!"

Technoblade shielded his eyes against the sun and watched his new star student absolutely own the dusty training ground. Two of the Temple's guards were already sitting flat on their bottoms, dazed and slightly disoriented. They still however watched

the final duel unfold, along with all the other soldiers who were packed tightly around the battleground like a barricade.

Velvet's footwork was only rivaled by the speed of his sword swings. He bobbed, weaved and ducked with ease, and just as easily lunged, parried and sliced the air.

Antfrost was a skilled fighter too, but even he was having a hard time keeping up. He eventually lost his footing, tripped over a rock and landed heavily on his back.

The sharp point of a rapier lingered by his throat, followed by an adoring shadow who blocked out the bright golden sun above.

"Seems like even outside the bedroom, you're so desperate to be under me," Velvet teased, hauling his husband to his feet.

"Velvet, that was wonderful!" Technoblade exclaimed over the acclamations of the rest of the Badlands. "But I don't think you need to try and seduce your enemy once they're down."

"You never know, Techno," Velvet replied coyly. "We have no idea what kind of dirty tricks those bastards could pull."

Then, as a last magnificent move, he threw his sword up into the air, caught it and slid it effortlessly into his scabbard with a bright smile and a bow. Again, everyone clapped and whooped with admiring and encouraging cries.

Antfrost's heart melted once again. If he thought he couldn't admire his husband enough, he was sorely mistaken. Seeing him fight so well, so in control and good enough to gain Technoblade's favour...

"You're too good to be true," the cat sighed. He wrapped his arms tightly around his beloved and rested his head on his shoulder with a purr.

As a response, Velvet leaned back against his chest. Their silver chest plates were the only parts that really touched, but it was enough for them before Techno broke their moment.

"Alright, that's enough slacking off!" His voice boomed through all their beings, the clapping of his hands heavy like thunder. "I've heard you Badlands are good with potions, aren't you? How about you show me what you can cook up and do."

The Badlands were good with the technicalities of war. They had the potion knowledge, and they had the redstone.

While one was being shown and demonstrated to Technoblade and Philza, the other one was currently thriving under Sam's leadership.

When Sam came back to the SMP all those years ago, he had come bearing gifts of redstone and engineering knowledge that could help make the world a better place. Unfortunately, he had never truly gotten the chance to do just that.

All his creations had ended up being for war or other dark purposes, cementing a reputation he wanted no part of. Even now, he couldn't ignore the twist in his gut that made him sick.

His redstone was needed for battle once again, to build and improve machines that could reduce civilizations to dust. To kill and injure.

Sam hated it, but he had no choice. The SMP needed anything they could get and with a heavy heart, he sent out a nationwide appeal for budding engineers and blacksmiths.

The help they received was far more than they had ever expected. People from the Badlands, of course, and Snowchester too, but also some from the Greater SMP and Kinoko Kingdom who dabbled in surface-level light systems and occasional pieces of farming equipment. None of them even came remotely close to Sam's level of expertise, but that was alright by him.

The call was heard and answered. In no time, a temporary workshop was set up in the form of a large canvas tent stretching out over a flat section of the Badlands' moor. It was lined on the inside with long tables and benches to act as workspaces and rest tables. Furnaces, oversized bellows and anvils were set up against the far end, and the rest of the space was soon to be filled by a myriad of different machines.

The first few days passed by in a breeze, with innovation after innovation lining every bit of floor they could. Canons were a big one, and Sam carefully thought out countless systems to make them shoot further, higher, easier to charge, move and aim.

He was the brain behind it all. He was the key to their redstone advantage, and that was what loaded the pressure onto his shoulders.

Now he was back in a world of redstone and war, his unhealthy habits from his days as the Warden started to resurface.

He was obsessed with the secrecy of his inventions, carrying the plans everywhere and refusing to let them go until they were passed on to the engineers – and only to designated engineers he fully trusted.

Then, there was the matter of his sleep schedule, once again running haywire, and often non-existent. He spent countless nights awake in the silence of the workshops designing, sketching and testing new systems, improving on old ones, and all in all striving for peak perfection. The lack of rest made him cranky and skittish, only tightening the iron fist he held over the workforce he commanded.

He even angrily snapped at Puffy once, who had only visited the workshops to see if he was alright – *gods bless!* Immediately after, he realized his mistake. The guilt continued to linger, even when she reassured him that it was alright, that she understood, that he was under a lot of stress, and that she forgave him. Nevertheless, he spent the rest of the day desperately making it up to her. He needed that – he needed to get away from the mechanical empire he had locked himself up in, and spend proper time with the living.

It only got worse from there, however. The work he missed came to bite him in the butt the day after. Then, the work from that day didn't get done until the first stack of chores was taken care of, which in turn meant more piled up overtime. Before long, Sam was once again buckling under the pressure of a burden he refused to share with anyone else.

Fortunately, things started to brighten up one night.

Sam had finally and completely collapsed from exhaustion at one of the long benches in their temporary workspace, his head tucked into the crook of one arm and the other sprawled out over his blueprints. He had succumbed to an uncomfortable, dreamless sleep, shivering whenever a gust of wind blew through the poorly closed flaps of the tent and fidgeting when pins and needles from relentlessly sitting on the hard wooden bench would start to prick him.

He was woken up by something heavy being laid around his shoulders, and opened his eyes to Tubbo sitting down beside him.

"Sorry for waking you," the ram apologized, setting down the collection of items in his arms. "Mum told me to bring these to the workshop for us to share."

Sam sleepily raised his head, taking note of the warm blanket around his shoulders. It was comforting and heavy, and smelt like home. He wrapped it closer around himself.

Tubbo had also been carrying a second, similar one, and put it around his own shoulders before turning his attention to the tin. "She and Tommy made some pancakes for us too."

He pried the lid open, and the delicious, honey-scented smell of the food wafted up towards the ceiling. Sam basked in it for a moment or two, simply inhaling the sweetness of both the gesture and the air itself. He didn't realize how hungry he was until his stomach started screaming bloody murder.

"She also told me to give you a kiss from her, but considering how you two like to do it, I'll pass on that request."

Sam cracked a smile and a tired chuckle. "Well, if you're not going to show me any affection, then I will."

He pulled Tubbo closer to him and draped his arm and blanket over him before he could escape. Tubbo laughed loudly and tried to push him off with a delightfully chosen cry of "sappy son of a bitch", before sinking into it all as Sam ruffled his hair. As the ram calmed his cackles and leaned into the other's side, Sam gave him a forehead kiss.

Sam was proud to say that his bonding sessions with Tubbo had definitely paid off, on both ends.

As agreed during the meeting with Eret, Tubbo came along with some of his people to help with the redstone. He pitched his own ideas often, many of which Sam applauded him for and explored in his blueprints. He also insisted on being part of the building process, ready to do anything from manning the bellows to screwing the parts together, and even taking some of the wonky and unstable machines out for explosive test runs – even against Sam's wishes.

He was a smart kid, a diligent worker, and a confident leader. He was ready to do whatever it took to move forward, even if that something would have him expose his devastating burn scars for all to see in the sweltering heat of the fire pits, or taking it upon himself to carry some painfully heavy parts from one end of the tent to the other.

He was determined to drive them to victory, even if that meant carrying the whole world on his back to do so.

Tubbo's enthusiasm was palpable, and it could be felt throughout the teams that worked alongside him. The engineering work was hard and grueling, but morale was surprisingly high – all because of Tubbo.

The young ram was as much of a son to Sam as Tommy was, and that luck and love warmed his heart.

That's my kid.

"Ready to eat?" Tubbo suggested, brandishing two forks and almost taking the man's eye out in the process.

Sam took one of them before anyone got hurt. "Ready," he grinned, and they started to dig in.

The pancakes were soft and fluffy, drizzled in golden honey that melted beautifully on their tongues. Sam could taste all the love and good intentions put into them – as well as a smidgen of Tommy's carelessness that manifested in the form of a little too much salt in some bites.

In all honesty, this was nice; spending some quality time with Tubbo late in the evening, bundled up in warm blankets in an empty workshop, and feasting on sweet treats by the light of a single lantern. Sam was still tired, but it was a good kind of exhaustion that made his brain feel warm and fuzzy.

They talked a bit as well, and that was where real life started leaking back through.

"I've been meaning to ask you something, Sam."

"Mhm?"

"Well, you know how we need more skilled engineers, right?"

Unsure of where things were going, Sam nodded slowly. "Yeah?"

Tubbo's hooves idly kicked the trestle of the table they were sitting at. "I think I know a guy who could be a huge help to us. To you, specifically. He's capable enough to take some of the workload."

Sam furrowed his brow, intrigued yet suspicious. "Who is it?"

"It's, uh, Fundy." Tubbo's hands immediately flew up in a defensive motion before Sam could voice his opinion. "Now, I know what you're thinking: 'Isn't that the guy who turned on L'Manberg when Doomsday rolled around?'" and yeah, you'd be right about that, but I can't hate him for it. He was smarter than all of us, to be honest. Anyway, he's

a good guy who's better fit for engineering than for fighting, and I think he'd make a great addition to the team, that is if you want him to—"

"Woah! Tubbo, buddy, slow down!" Sam laughed, and the ram finally breathed. "You don't need to sell him to me, I know. But are you sure he even *wants* to join us?"

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't exactly turned up among us, and we did put word out that we needed engineers."

"Yeah, well, about that..." Tubbo began to fidget in his seat again. "I saw him at the bakery the other day. I was going to get Ranboo who took Velvet's shift, and Fundy walked in. We had some cake together and talked, and he told me why he didn't turn up. He wants to, but after everything he's done, he's scared that no one will want him back or trust him. He's braver than he was, but the rejection is what he's really scared of. I promised that I'd put in a personal word for him. So?"

Sam admired Tubbo's loyalty to his vows, but even then, it wasn't needed. Sam was prepared to bring Fundy in among them, for the simple reason that he was a curious, talented fox with eyes and paws for redstone. That, and Fundy was one of the people that broke into Pandora's Vault to save his life. He was smart enough to find the backdoors in some of Sam's security systems and get Puffy and Ranboo through – and eventually Techno too. Sam hadn't had a chance to thank him properly yet.

The next day, he sent Tubbo to get Fundy, and welcomed him to the workshop with open arms.

"Tubbo tells me you were a little wary of coming to help us," Sam remarked, watching out of the corner of his eye as the fox stared in awe at the noisy work around them.

"Uh, yeah," Fundy replied, absent-mindedly. "I just... I don't think I have what it takes."

"You don't?" Sam was genuinely surprised, and uncertain whether it was Fundy's modesty talking or his self-deprecation. "Who in the world told you that? Fundy, you're a genius."

The fox's ears perked up, his attention now fully on Sam. "I am?"

"Of course! I've seen you tinker around the Badlands, and not to mention your work breaking into the Vault. You know your way around these systems. Have you ever studied at an academy?"

"No, I just pick up and potter around with machines and sort of work it out from there." Fundy suddenly looked a little awkward. "My dad— Wilbur, I mean... He said that redstone was a waste of time, y'know? Learning how to fight for L'Manberg was a lot more important to him."

All of Sam's compassion went to the fox, finding in him a fellow, controlled child. "My dad said sort of the same thing," he replied, omitting the real details, "but I went and studied anyway. I could get you into a good academy, if you want me to."

Fundy perked up again, his eyes shining with shock and excitement. "I..." He shared a quick look with Tubbo, who gave him an approving nod. "Y-Yeah, that would be poggers!"

Sam smiled. "Good. Unfortunately, we have a little obstacle in the way before we can make that happen."

"The war." Fundy's ears plastered themselves against his scalp. "Got to live through that before we can plan anything else..."

Sam privately made a note to send a letter to his friends at the Hermitcraft Redstone Academy, or maybe even Cogchamp, and secure Fundy a place among them. If anything happened to Sam himself during the carnage, at least he could keep his promise to the fox and give him a bright future.

"That still doesn't mean you can't gain some experience now."

Sam led them further into the workshop, occasionally diverting from their present conversation to answer a question from one of the other engineers, to correct a redstone system and avoid blowing everyone up, or simply to hand over a new blueprint to be constructed.

"Fundy, you have the talent," Sam continued. "You have our trust and you have the skills to be put in charge of something very important."

"And what's that?"

"Full command of the artillery when the time comes." He heard Fundy stop in his tracks, and turned to face him.

In all honesty, the fox looked terrified. "The full command?"

"If that's alright with you, that is."

"But... you're... where will you be?"

"The Badlands are so few already," Sam reminded him with a sigh, "and Tubbo's the beating heart of Snowchester. Our duty calls for us to lead the charge, and we can't be in two places at once. We need someone capable and trustworthy to man the guns."

"You're that man, Fundy," Tubbo interjected with a playful punch. "Or fox, I should say."

Then, they awaited the reply with bated breath.

Fundy's eyes kept travelling from one to the other, digging behind their eyes to pick at their brains and try and uncover their true, hidden intentions. There were none – they had stated exactly what they wanted.

Then, the fox's eyes looked over at the war machines being assembled all around them, drinking in the shouts, the clanging of metal, the whirring, the clouds of redstone and blacksmith smoke that filled the air.

This was his world, and everyone knew it. It was his true calling and he was given the chance to finally and fully be a part of it all.

"Alright," he agreed with a sharp, confident nod. "I'll do it."

A good chunk of the weight of Sam's shoulders slipped away, and he smiled. "Thank you, Fundy."

"I only have one condition."

"And what's that?"

"That we don't point anything at my father." The fox's voice went lower, taking the previously victorious mood down with it. "He may be a maniac, but he's still my dad. I can't bring myself to kill him, no matter how insane he is or what he's done. I don't want anything I command to shoot him down."

Sam understood, he really did, but unfortunately nothing could be guaranteed in a massacre. "You're not pointing anything at him, just at his army and at Dream," were the only words of relative comfort he could give him.

Tubbo, on the other hand, brushed the problem of Wilbur aside and beamed, delighted to work by Fundy's side again after all these years and strife.

It was a grin he kept for the rest of the day. It was a smile he unfortunately should have erased before going back to Snowchester and blurting their good fortune out to Tommy.

His friend was far as elated as Tubbo was, and in fact received the news with a scowl.

"Great. So the fucking furry gets a gig, and I don't."

Tubbo winced at his best friend's thundering glare. "Um, basically yeah..."

Tommy sniffed and turned away, burying his nose back in his book. "Fab-fucking-tastic," he grumbled, closing himself off from the world again.

There was only one person that seemed to be left out of everything, and that person was Tommy. It was definitely not by his own choice.

First, the leaders' meeting. Then, all the war preparations.

At first, he had confidently offered his services as one of L'Manberg's ex-generals to Kinoko to help with battle plans. They turned him down.

In hindsight, maybe that was for the best. Locking Sapnap and Tommy in the same room, both big men with big, fiery attitudes and conflicting ideas, was a perfect recipe for destruction and would likely end in a blazing war room, quite literally.

Then, he went to see Sam, Tubbo and the redstone engineers. Again, they turned down his help, this time with a smile and gentle words.

"It's alright, Tommy," Sam had said, looking far more exhausted than usual. "We've got this."

Again, he could understand that. He knew jack-shit about engineering, and he'd probably get bored and whiny in the first ten minutes. He didn't want to add any more stress onto Sam, who was clearly struggling to cope with what he had already.

He did consider training with the troops, but he knew for a fact that any order from Technoblade would make him ballistic.

He was a big man who had been in wars before. He didn't need to learn again. Wilbur had made sure that all his training stuck with him forever, and he had some deep scars to prove it.

The only time Tommy did snap during the war preparations, however, was when he was rejected from the scouting parties as well.

"I don't get it!" he cried. "Why can't I come with you?"

Puffy cast her patrol an apologetic look, then led the boy off to the side. "Tommy, it's for the best," she started to explain. "We don't know what or who we're going to run into—"

"So? I know how to fight!"

"That's not what I mean, honey." Puffy took a deep breath. "You're a liability."

"A liability?"

"An attachment, like the discs."

"You're calling me an *object*?!"

"No, Tommy, you're not— That's not what I—" She stopped herself, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Listen, you're too important to lose. If we do get into a scuffle with Wilbur or Dream and they take you hostage, what then? What would that mean for you, for us?"

It had happened before, when Tommy and Tubbo had gone off alone to confront Dream one last time. After blackmail, lies, a furious fight and a kidnapping, Dream took them down to an underground lair with the intent to imprison and kill the two boys.

It took a sudden change of loyalty from Punz, a well-placed Nether portal to the secret lair and a loyal search party for them to be saved, and get Dream arrested and sent off to Pandora's Vault.

All those who had stood by Tommy's side that day did so *willingly*. They *chose* to save him, and he was certain that they'd do it again. He was, after all, one of their most valuable sources of information regarding Wilbur.

He did have to admit that Puffy had a point though. A good point, but one that didn't make him any less bitter about his rejection. He didn't push her any further – although he did make his annoyance at the whole thing clear, especially when the patrols came back empty handed.

According to Philza's obnoxiously pretentious report, they had been no further than the first mountain chain past the L'Manberg moorland. They found nothing at all, not even a sign of any soul's passing.

Dream and Wilbur's army had started to become more of a tall tale than a reality to many.

Tommy, however, knew it was very much real, and just as terrifying.

If the patrols couldn't find anything, that must mean that this undead army was stationed far away... or right under their noses. That was just as chilling, and Tommy tried to put that fear to rest.

Without telling anyone where he was going, not that they would have noticed anyway, he made his way to Pogtopia. He was surprised to find the ravine missing its roof, but he was relieved to find it empty.

He did take a moment to clamber down into the chasm after years of refraining to do so, and he nosed around a bit. He had to admit, he liked Pogtopia's clear view of the sky now. He would have liked it to have been that way back when he lived there, so he could have seen the stars at night – it would have made life in the cavernous darkness a little more bearable.

He ended up finding a few unclaimed chests as well, brimming with ores and relics of the past. He found a few tattered uniforms, a pair of pistols, a rifle and bayonet, and a torn, moth-eaten flag, which he quickly stuffed in his bag and took home with him.

In the days that followed, he got to work fixing them up. Armed with needles, thread, and other sewing accessories that were utterly useless to his inexperienced hands. He disassembled, cleaned and reassembled the firearms, stitched up the tears in the uniform, re-did the looser seams, polished the buttons and dyed the flag once again. It all admittedly took a lot longer than he would have liked it to, but it wasn't like he had anything else to do.

During the sunnier days, he'd sit out on the steps of Puffy's cabin and work until the cold would finally threaten to bite off his fingers. Then, he'd retreat back inside and

continue in the warmth, spending entire afternoons and nights in the golden light of the fireplace.

He'd whistle old L'Manbergian tunes as he worked, or simply let nostalgic memories consume his being. Occasionally, Ranboo would come and keep him company. Sometimes, they talked, other times, they'd get on with their own activities in silence, Tommy with his restoration, Ranboo with his writing. Michelle also liked spending time with them, so Tommy had someone to tell stories to until she fell asleep by his side.

Puffy, when she wasn't busy with the war preparations on the mainland, made sure he met his day to day needs. She made him food, reminded him to drink regularly, and gently coaxed him to go to bed when his tiredness would make him prick himself repeatedly with the needle or mess up a seam an ungodly amount of times. She looked after him, and Tommy liked it.

Every thank you he gave her was reciprocated by a caring look, a smile, and a kiss on the forehead.

It was rare now that Sam would come back, the redstone taking up most of his days and nights. When he did turn up however, at some ungodly hour of the early morning, Tommy would always be hard at work. Sam would walk in and catch his gaze, then they would exchange half-hearted chuckles and jabs at their respective, exhausted states. That said, there was always their deep affection for one another in their banter.

"Hey, Tommy," Sam smiled, taking off his snow-covered boots by the door.

"You look dead," Tommy noted. "All pale and shit like a zombie."

"I appreciate the compliment."

"Don't worry, I'm in severe pain too. Big Man's tired."

"You don't look like you're in pain."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Tommy tutted. He rolled his eyes and picked up the gun he was cleaning. "Let me just shoot myself in the leg real quick to make it convincing."

Sam laughed. "Well, tell me if it gets any worse, hm?" he made the boy promise, momentarily cutting off their lighthearted amusement with true concern.

Tommy nodded. "Will do, king."

Sam patted his back and smiled, and bent down to scratch Fran between her ears. He left their side and climbed the stairs. A moment later, Tommy heard a creak, followed by a soft, sleepy groan and a hushed voice. Then, nothing, and the house fell asleep again.

Tommy and Sam never properly asked or told one another about their hardworking days, but that was alright.

Tommy appreciated the normalcy of their interactions during such troubling times. It allowed him to pretend that peace was here to stay just for a bit longer.

In fact, he was almost convinced that it would, if King Eret's sudden desire for a ball was anything to go by.

In a time of war, it was a weird thing to organize, but the monarch explained it away as "a reward for all our hard work, and an evening to relax".

Needless to say, not everyone turned up. In fact, few did, undoubtedly scared away by memories of the Red Banquet. They were still enough however to get the party swinging and the ambiance light and joyful. It was fun – if Tommy wasn't forced to dress up formally for the occasion.

He should have read Tubbo's invitation a little closer.

But when he walked into the palace at the beginning of the evening as part of the Badlands and Snowchester retinues, the eyes on him and compliments thrown his way did boost his ego sky high. He had to admit, he definitely felt pretty fucking poggers, and so did the others.

He had never seen Sam in a suit or wearing a crown before, and he had never imagined Puffy wearing anything else but captain uniforms or casual slacks. The light blue dress that complimented her eyes was pretty, and Tommy teasingly asked her for a dance to "make all the other ladies jealous".

His plan to get a girlfriend by the end of the evening did backfire, notably when he realized that he had two left feet. He instead handed his Puffy to someone who *did* know how to dance and scampered away to drown his failures with Tubbo and Ranboo.

They too were dressed up, and they all immediately began tearing into each other.

"Your bowtie looks ridiculous," Tubbo smirked.

Tommy snorted. "How can it look ridiculous if I just took it off. At least it's better than the piss hanging off your horns."

"Hey! I'll have you know that they happen to be pure gold chains, thank you very much."

"Looks like shining piss streams to me. My point still stands."

"Well, at least we're both better looking than Ranboo," Tubbo said, gesturing to their tall hybrid friend.

"You're just jealous because I'm used to dressing like this and look amazing," Ranboo sniffed, cockily smoothing his hair back.

"Yeah, exactly. You always wear the same dumb clothes. You made no effort tonight." Tommy stuck out his tongue, and Ranboo quickly reciprocated.

"Hey, if you kids aren't interested anymore, then maybe I could stop before you make me burn the palace down," Sapnap scolded, a fireball still dancing at the end of his fingers.

Immediately, the three of them shook their heads and focused their attention back on the fireborn.

"No! Keep going!"

"Yeah, we're still interested!"

"Fire away, Snapchat!"

"Call me that again and I'll roast you like a pig," Sapnap threatened, swinging a flame close to Tommy's face and making him shriek. He smirked. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

He resumed his fire show, enchanting the small group that had formed around him. It was magnificent, and yes, Tommy was the one who had begged the fireborn to show them a few flaming tricks, but he didn't exactly want to stare at the fire for long.

The dancing orange and red sparks brought back memories of war, and staring down into the depths of the Nether's lava lakes, so close to jumping in and ending it all...

That wasn't what the evening was meant to be about. He instead let his eyes wander anywhere but towards the fire.

Nikki and Karl were standing not far from Sapnap, in Tommy's earshot. Karl's pearly eyes were gazing aimlessly at nothing, and Nikki was softly describing the beauty before them out loud. A golden ring glimmered on his finger, set with a diamond and a few fragments of emerald.

Karl and Sapnap had announced their engagement earlier that evening, and it had been the first piece of good news to grace everyone's ears in ages. Congratulations were tossed around, and a bit of the attention shifted to Eret and Sam, teasingly asking them if they had their own wedding bells to chime as well.

After all, now Karl and Antfrost had cemented their consorts, surely other leaders would follow in their footsteps.

King Eret had laughed the question off, reminding everyone that these things took time, and he was waiting to find the right person.

Sam also laughed the question off at first, but Tommy had noticed the awkward shift in his stance. After all, his denial wasn't as easy to brush aside as Eret's was, and everyone knew that. Instead, he smiled and also reminded everyone that these things took time. The boy, however, noticed that he was deeply pensive for a good while after that.

"I don't get it," he whispered to Tubbo. "Why is this wedding shit so important to people anyway?"

"I don't know," his friend replied.

"You're the leader here."

"Yeah, but still. I don't know exactly. I guess it's just the security."

"Security?"

"You know, lineage and all that." When Tommy gave him a confused look, Tubbo elaborated. "It kind of keeps the power stable, if you know what I mean. Two leaders marry, have kids, and then pass their power down to them when the time comes, if that's how their political regime works. It stays in the family."

"Uh huh..."

"So basically, if Sam marries my mum, I could technically be an heir to the Badlands, along with any other kids of theirs. Heck, maybe even you could be too." He thought for a moment. "And actually, that means that there would be a weird inheritance game

regarding Snowchester as well, since we haven't stated that we're a democracy of any sort and—"

"Alright, alright, I get it!" Tommy stopped him before things got too out of hand, or far too detailed for his liking. "It's complicated."

"It's how power works, I guess."

"Well then, I'm sort of glad I'm not too involved in it anymore."

Tommy watched as Tubbo's eyes darkened a little, overcome with a tiredness he hadn't expected to see. "Yeah, you're not—"

That was when the doors banged open.

The warmth of the ball was suddenly whisked away, replaced with a glacial chill that blew out the candles and darkened the stone. The orchestra came to a sudden halt, strings and keys plucking and hitting one last, out of tune note. The ballroom was abandoned, and the gathering split off to the sides. Everyone seemed to move at once. Tommy didn't, too startled to make head or tail of anything, he found himself pushed away from Tubbo, and shoved to the other side of the hall.

Something— *someone* had just made a dramatic entrance, shushing the crowd without a single word or look in their direction, the only clue of their identity the dark, ominous shadow stretched out over the floor.

Then, they took a step – heavy, armoured, chilling in the deafening silence of the surroundings. It was followed by an echo of three others. Another one was taken, again followed by three echos. Then another, and another. Never fast, always slow and deliberate, almost savouring the silence. The beats bounced off the walls and into everyone's ears, banging around their minds like drums.

Finally, the newcomers came into the light.

"Forgive the intrusion," Dream said, his voice muffled by his horrifying mask. "We heard that there was a ball here."

No one answered him, except in strangled cries and terrified sobs.

Dream looked around again, and chuckled. "Not much of a party ambiance, is there?" he tutted, likely more to his companions than anything.

His retinue agreed with nods, and a couple of smiles. Tommy fought the twisted feeling in his stomach when he caught Wilbur's eye. Schlatt was with them too, but his presence built up more of a rage in Tommy than a fear. And finally, the fourth newcomer was one that Tommy knew little to nothing about. He knew his name and his reputation, but nothing more.

Purpled also caught his eye, but his face was passive, pinched into a scowl that showed no glee, no hate, simply no emotion.

Dream walked forwards, alone this time, again with slow and deliberate steps. He let them ring around the room, a rhythmic torment that slowly frayed and snapped everyone's nerves. He spun around, taking in the world around him, once so full of joy and laughter.

He raised his hands to them all, offering a toast, a promise of victory, a good look at the nightmare come true. "Miss me?"

"Guards," King Eret commanded, stepping out from the sidelines. "*Seize them.*"

The soldiers at the door snapped to attention at their king's order, and readied their weapons.

Dream stopped them from advancing with nothing but a dismissive wave of his hand. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Eret my dear," he hummed. "My army is surrounding the castle right now. If anything happens to me, they have been given the order to attack. You'll all be dead in a heartbeat." He glanced at the rest of the guests. "And seeing that you're armour and weaponless, perhaps in even less."

The guards stuttered to a stop, visibly unsure of what to do, say or obey. They looked at their king for guidance. Eret held Dream's gaze for a little longer, then calmly waved his soldiers away.

"Good boy," Dream praised. "You always obeyed me so well."

"You were foolish to come back here, Dream," King Eret interrupted him, visibly unnerved by the other's comment. "You're an escaped convict, wanted in every nation. People would do anything to display your head on a silver platter."

"Is that so?" Dream scoffed. "How adorable."

"Eret, I'll take care of him," Technoblade suddenly grunted, pushing through the crowd.

Again, Dream seemed completely unfazed. "Looking good, Techno. Like the new build. Your new workout, perhaps? By the way, I never got to properly thank you for helping me escape."

At that, everyone in the great hall bristled, staring at the Blade with wide eyes. He said nothing, jaw clenched and gaze focused forward.

"That's enough small talk," Eret stepped in again. "What are you doing here?"

Dream paused for a moment, and Tommy could almost see the sickening grin behind his mask. "Desperate to get to the point, eh?" He started to dig around in the pack slung over his shoulder. "Either you're being diplomatic, or you're scared shitless. I'm putting my money on a little bit of both."

Finally, he brandished something high into the air. A rolled up parchment of some sort, held together by a red ribbon and a wax seal.

"Here I have a map of a suitable battlefield," Dream went on. "It's at an equal distance between both of our home lands, and we haven't ventured there in advance. Everything we know is from this map."

"Why?"

"Well, you've been preparing for a war, haven't you? We're just here in peace to pass on the meeting point, to give you all an equal chance."

Yes, they had been preparing a war, but how did Dream know that? How did he know about the ball, where everyone would be together?

A movement in the distance caught his eyes, and he watched a panicked Ranboo flip through the pages of his memory book.

I swear to the gods, Ranboob, if your enderwalk has anything to do with this...

Thank goodness he had been left out of the important meetings and not been given any sensitive information.

Dream threw the map to the floor. It rolled towards Eret and stopped. No one moved to pick it up. No one even took a single step, but the death warrant was all that they were focused on.

Wilbur smiled. Schlatt smirked. Purpled stayed cold and unreadable, and Dream started to speak again, turning away from Eret and instead addressing everyone else.

"We wish you good luck," he said loudly, clapping his hands together. "I don't doubt your strength as an army, but I certainly doubt your leaders."

He looked at them each in turn, starting with Eret. His mask tilted up and down, taking in him and his glittering turquoise dress trimmed with peacock feathers. "After all, you're being commanded by a leader with more elaborate clothes than morals—"

Then, Karl. "—a blind, daydreaming loon—"

Technoblade and Philza. "—a bloodthirsty maniac and his domesticated crow—"

Tubbo. "—the spineless president who let L'Manberg fall—"

Antfrost. "—a traitor who ditched his people for an egg—"

Finally, Sam. Dream stared at him long and hard without saying a single word. He didn't even seem to be moving either, or even breathing. "—and a ghost," he concluded in a small voice.

The room started to come alive again, now that their leaders were being attacked. Each nation assembled around their kings and chiefs, forming walls of solidarity that could offer them nothing but undying loyalty.

"Oh, you're running to them like hounds now, but just wait until they offer you up as sacrifices just to protect their territory and self-esteem."

"If that's all you have to say to us, then I think you should leave," Eret said, his voice cold and serious. "Peace is a fragile thing."

"Yes it is, isn't it?" Dream briefly glanced back at his three companions. "I don't think we're very welcome here – sorry for getting your hopes up about a nice, lavish party. However, His Majesty King Eret is graciously letting us say hello to some of our old friends."

All at once, three of the four pairs of eyes landed on different corners of the room.

The first focused on one of the groups huddled on the sidelines. Antfrost hissed and unsheathed his claws, stepping protectively in front of Velvet. Skeppy reached up to Sam and whispered something frantically into his ear. One of Sam's hands balled into a

fist, and he was visibly two seconds away from lunging. Schlatt didn't seem to care about any of that, instead flashing them a smirk. Puffy quickly put a hand on Tubbo's shoulder and pulled him closer to her, her blue eyes staring Schlatt down with the wrath of the seven old seas. Tubbo didn't react in any way – the absence behind his eyes numbed the rest of his expression.

Wilbur also flashed a sickening grin towards his own prey, the black-winged fowl. Philza's feathers ruffled, his face a ghostly white, all his blood rushing away to make room for the poisoned dread that had started to consume them all.

And finally, the third fixed stare belonged to Dream. The eyes of his mask were cold and black, and more piercing than any other living creature's stare. The arrows of frozen, dark terror parted the crowd, and found their mark in two of the bodies making up the Kinoko crowd. Sapnap's skin and hair began to simmer and flare, eyes blazing with a hate unlike any other. George simply froze up, as deathly white and rigid as a corpse. However, the eyes with which he stared at Dream were far from such – oddly bright and clear, like a warm summer sky. Two blooming flowers in a bleak, mid-winter landscape. They were scared, yes, but also filled with an emotion almost invisible to outsiders. It was a strong one, rooted deeply into his soul.

The fourth pair of eyes, belonging to Purpled, were constantly moving, unable to stay in one place. They glanced around the room, inspected every dark corner, unidentified figure and behind every pillar, trying to find someone. Trying to find his own anchor, whoever that may have been. Whoever it was, however, certainly wasn't there, and Purpled instead decided to forcefully lock them onto King Eret.

"Thank you for your time," Dream said, finally ripping away his eyes from his victims. "I'm relieved we've managed to come to an arrangement."

He dragged the last word out for a little too long, sending chills up Tommy's spine. A hackneyed arrangement. A simple, banal agreement to solve a simple, banal little situation.

There was nothing bland or playful about a declaration of war – at least not to him.

Dream snapped his fingers, calling his little party together, and looked out over the room one last time. He crossed Tommy's gaze, tilting his masked head to the side. The boy almost expected him to start advancing towards him with jerky, menacing movements, like a killer corpse out for blood.

"The red phantom that refused to join my side," Dream tittered, giving Tommy a pensive sigh. "You truly are one of a kind. I'll be seeing you in hell."

He swiftly grabbed something from the folds of his green cloak and chucked it to the floor. A threatening boom echoed around the palace hall, followed by a flash of blinding light that shot out from behind a curtain of lime smoke as thick as that of an erupting volcano.

The rest of the gathering screamed and jumped back, desperately clawing at each other in a fit of panic. The guards brandished their weapons, their sense of duty overpowering Dream's heavy threat, and charged headfirst into the cloud.

They collided with each other, but nothing and no one more. As the smoke cleared, the four figures that had stood there had vanished. The palace doors were slightly ajar, and a group of horses reared from outside. It was soon followed by galloping. In the middle of the thunder, Tommy came to his senses.

He rushed forwards and snatched a sword from the nearest soldier, ignored the cries that wanted to reel him back in, and sprinted out of the hall.

The night was bitterly cold, in heavy contrast to the delicious, rich warmth of the ball. The sudden change made Tommy suck in a breath and shiver, his nervous sweat cooled shockingly fast. He kept running, his fast footsteps echoing eerily across the empty courtyard cobbles and wooden paths. He charged under the gate, spying four steeds and their riders well down the Prime Path by now.

Tommy stopped under the arch, raising his sword up high. In-between sharp, tired breaths, and started to scream.

"You cowards! You fucking cowards! You ain't shit! I'm not scared of you!"

His throat was raw, his threats and insults coming out as strained, high-pitched screeches.

"You hear me?! I'm not scared of you, any of you! Fight me! I'll duel you all myself! I will see you in fucking hell, Dream, because I'll send you there myself! Come back here and fight me like men! Fight me! Fight me!"

And to be fair, one of them did seem to consider it.

Tommy dropped to his knees, his energy completely drained, his chest heaving, his throat scratching, and he saw one of the four horses stop.

A pair of bright violet eyes, visible to Tommy even in the dark, stared him down. Tommy glared back, his exhausted panting turning into enraged, breathless snarls.

"*Fight me!*" he forced himself to yell again. "*Fight me!*"

But Purpled didn't move.

Coward.

He continued to stare.

Bastard.

But in his eyes, Tommy saw no evil. They were cold and hard, yes, but they weren't tainted by the painted coat of manic insanity that the others held in theirs.

Liar.

Faker.

A sharp whistle snapped Purpled back to attention. He turned his horse around and rejoined the three other men. They then disappeared down the path, and the night swallowed them whole.

The sword escaped Tommy's hand, and he let it fall with a clatter. His head was spinning, and he lay down, his spine pressed against the hard wood of the path, and his head turned up to the gateway above him.

The portcullis loomed, its jaws of death ready to clamp down and impale him.

The forest outside the castle walls was silent. Not even the vicious nocturnal mobs stirred, nor the creatures of the underbrush. Whatever army Dream had supposedly surrounded the castle with had either left or were far stealthier than anyone could have ever thought them to be.

Tommy was lying down in a tomb, just as he always knew he'd end up doing. He was languishing in the dark, surrounded by cold, stone walls, resting on a hard wooden floor with a sword by his side, and suffocated by the silence. He may as well have been buried six feet under already.

"Tommy!"

"Tommy, where are you?"

He barely registered Tubbo and Ranboo's voices as they rushed towards him.

Everything was about to ignite, to explode.

The talk of the war that so many had called fallacious was about to be so much more than that. It was happening. It was really *happening*.

"There you are!" Two pairs of arms pulled him up and held him tightly. A horn brushed his neck, and a long tail wound around his waist. "We thought you had run off to do something stupid..."

Tommy wasn't scared of the threat – at least, he tried not to be. All his life, he had been fighting for something, anything, no matter how small. Facing off against Dream would be nothing new, just another battle to add to their long list of animosity.

However, there was something about the upcoming war that did fill his brain with cold, frightening mist.

Something felt... *different*.

Very different.

The stakes were higher. He had more to lose. He had one life left. He wasn't fighting on the same side as Wilbur. He was about to face off against an army of brainwashed souls, an undead army, one that promised to rain fire and brimstone down upon them all.

Dream said he'd see Tommy in hell.

Bold of you to assume that we're not there already.

Meanwhile, back in the palace, the mood had decidedly been killed for good. The once joyful, harmonious gathering had split back off into small groups who conversed in stuttering, nervous voices. Everything had come to a halt, the only movements being the occasional turning of heads towards the rolled up parchment on the floor.

It was just waiting there, tantalizing. Dangerous, even. One glance at its contents would seal their doom for good.

King Eret was the first one to venture forwards. He bent down and picked it up. With shaking fingers, he broke the wax seal and wound away the blood red ribbon. He unrolled the paper, and he stared.

A map of a bowl-like valley he didn't know, surrounded by hills and mountains. He looked at it for a good while, trying to get his brain to start thinking up potential strategies and battle plans, but his attention was constantly drawn back to a single line in red ink. It was written in the middle of the map's terrain, and was made up of two simple words.

One day.

One day until the beginning of the end.

Eret took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and counted to three. He opened them again and rolled up the map.

"Party's over," he announced, desperately trying to keep his tone composed and warm. He channeled his nervousness into his hands, gripping and scrunching up the map tightly, throttling it and its ominous words. "I need to see you in private."

Everyone knew who exactly was concerned, and the gathering split up again. The partygoers headed out the door, and the leaders followed Eret.

Needless to say, the meeting that took place afterwards in the war room was the best-dressed one the Greater SMP had ever known, despite it being far from the happiest.

They debriefed, brushed over technicalities, paced the floor, screamed at each other as well as at the gods and punched the stone walls, but they all came out haunted by Dream's parting words to them.

One day.

The wait proceeding the war would seem long, until it would inevitably come to an end. Now that the end of it was here, they ended up being right.

Time had never been shorter.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: The Final Night

There's a lot that one can do in a day.

But in dire times, it never seems like enough, no matter which way you look at it. Not enough weapons, food, armour, firepower, training, morale... anything at all, despite it all being carefully piled into a staggering procession of carts that stretched almost the entire way from Kinoko's library in the South to Pandora's Vault up North.

It never seemed *enough*, they all knew that, and in times of war, it could very much push them one step closer to their downfall.

Every able bodied being was conscripted to fight, except the children – a unanimous decision taken by the nations' leaders for the first time in the SMP's short but tumultuous history.

Children as young as ten simply didn't understand why they were being left behind. After all, they had fought in wars before, and had shocking collections of scars to prove their valour. Why were they not pushed to fight in this one, where clearly numbers mattered more than ever?

Quite simply, in a time of such chaos, the adults had surprisingly come to some of their senses.

There was no reason to drag the children down with them for their own mistakes.

Children should never have been forced to battle in the first place, to fight for causes and goals they knew little to nothing about. They should have been playing with little animal toys and dolls, not fully fledged, lethal weapons that could kill too easily. They should have had the time to grow up simply, not nurse wounds and amputated limbs they should have never sustained in the first place.

They were children, not soldiers – and damn those who thought otherwise!

So for the first time in the SMP's history, all those under the age of eighteen were left behind – all except Tommy, of course, who no one could keep at bay no matter how hard they tried.

Most of the children understood what was happening, and either accepted quietly or protested loudly as the older members of their families marched off to war.

The youngest ones, however, were a completely different story. They didn't know. They couldn't understand, they were still so small, innocent and helpless. Saying goodbye was hard, too hard.

Many parents ended up crying, knowing that their kids wouldn't understand where they were going, and why many would never come back. That was the state Ranboo and Tubbo, and Sam and Puffy were in when they said goodbye to their own little ones.

"Where are you going?" Michael asked, taken aback by the crushing bear hug he was being scooped up in.

"Somewhere very dangerous," Ranboo replied, knowing that Tubbo could not.

The ram tightened his grip, burying his face into his son's shoulder, only beginning to realize how painful leaving your child really was.

"Are you coming back?"

Faced with Michelle's wide, curious eye, Puffy teared up. "Of course we are, sweetheart. We always will."

"You might just have to wait a bit," Sam added, swallowing down the heavy ball in his throat. "But we always will, in the end."

Fran whimpered and stood protectively behind Michelle, the little piglin safely wedged between her front paws.

And with that, the Greater SMP, the Badlands, Kinoko Kingdom, Snowchester and their few allies from the Temple and the Antarctic Commune marched off to war.

They headed West, past L'Manberg's crater and ruins, through the birch forest that hid Pogtopia, over the moorland, and finally stopped at the foot of the first mountain chain.

Beyond it lay the future battlefield, the death trap that once leapt into wouldn't let them leave until there was a clear and final victor.

They made no comment, no observation.

They set up camp, and the final night was soon upon them.

Most went to bed immediately, exhausted from the journey and their doubts. Others stayed awake just a little longer, wanting to see the stars and feel the clear, fresh breeze one last time.

Perhaps what was most deafening was the silence. It was heavy, and had settled over them all like a thick blanket, unnoticed but felt by all. No one broke it unless it was absolutely necessary. It was an unspoken pact.

The quiet was a gift, the last remnants of the fragments of peace they had strived to collect.

They all wished to make the most of it while they were still alive, before they basked in it indefinitely once dead.

"I thought Technoblade trained you better."

"He did, but I mean, come on! You're practically dragging me!"

"Because you're not fast enough!"

Antfrost looked around with a mischievous grin. Velvet rolled his eyes and pouted. "I'm tired, Ant!" he protested with a whine.

The cat's smirk only widened. "Please, I've been meaning to show you this at least once!"

"So the eve of a battle was your go-to moment, right?"

He purred, "Just trust me on this."

He knew that Velvet did, and it was confirmed when his husband nodded and picked up his pace.

They kept climbing the forested hills and breathing in the cool evening air. Needles and dry grass crunched underfoot, and the owls screeched loudly from the dark canopy above them. Whenever Antfrost turned back to check on Velvet, his eyes were drawn to the sea of golden orange lights that sparkled from down below. The camp seemed to be

getting smaller and smaller the further they ascended, the tents and fires soon becoming a single, indistinguishable glowing mass broken up by the needle-thin, shadowed trunks of the pine trees.

Further to the left, he could just make out the rocky frontier that separated them from tomorrow's battleground, jutting like crooked teeth against the starry sky. He tried not to linger on the thoughts too long.

He instead opted to make the most of life that evening rather than chain himself down with thoughts of death, although they were never far behind.

And Velvet was coming with him whether he liked it or not.

(And Antfrost knew he did. Otherwise, he wouldn't have dragged him along with him into the dark, eerie forest.)

They neared the top soon after, where the slope softened into a nice little landscape filled with mossy boulders and pools of water that were clogged with clumps of pine needles and mud, surrounded by reeds. Fireflies twirled through the air and danced with the stars, and the trees swayed and creaked.

Antfrost lifted his muzzle up to the sky and opened his mouth a little, just enough to get a clearer scent. The musty, sulphuric odour that he had been tracking was much more prominent now, and he smiled as he realized that their ascent was not for nothing. Next, he cocked his ears and readied his whiskers, desperate for one last confirmation. It came in the form of steady rustling and waves of ticking vibrations.

He smiled, and yanked Velvet behind a thicket of thorns just as a group of shadows plodded into view.

"Please assure me that what you've dragged us out here to do is at least legal," Velvet hissed, trying his best not to get pricked by thorns.

Antfrost still had his eyes glued to the clearing, and a beaming grin still plastered on his face. "Shut up and look," he whispered, gently tilting Velvet's head towards a suitable viewing hole between the tangled tendrils.

When they had started setting up the camp below, a number of soldiers and leaders had noticed certain, suspicious things littered around the site. They were things like ashen excrements, beaten back trails, claw marks on trees, tufts of green fur and footprints

leading up into the hills. They didn't like it, but it was too late to find a new spot, and so they simply warned their troops and patrols to keep an eye out for any disturbances.

As a leader, Antfrost was worried for his army and helped Sam and Skeppy set up proper precautions. As a naturalist, however, he was ecstatic, and had been relentlessly sniffing the air, trying to get as much information as he could.

What he found out from smell alone overjoyed him, and he realized that the wild animal "problem" the SMP's camp was facing was in fact a very special occurrence. He wanted to see it for himself, and he wanted to share the moment with someone.

Who better than the man he cared about most in the whole world: his own husband.

That was what had initiated their nocturnal hike, and now what had them kneeling in brambles and watching discreetly from afar.

The beings that had made their way into the clearing could be seen a lot better now, their figures contoured by the milky white light of the moon. There were four of them: one big, and three small.

In the light, they were far more than shadows. Rather, they were strange creatures that stood on four legs, with a stubby tail and a long neck supporting a head with no visible ears. Their eyes were blackened, and only lit up by small, shining pupils of bright green or silver. They were also covered in moss-like pelts speckled with patches of green, black and white freckles that decorated their limbs and back like shards of a fractured mosaic.

"Are those—"

"Creepers," Ant whispered, still smiling.

Velvet didn't move and the cat glanced over. He was absolutely transfixed to the scene, with an air of childlike wonderment. "I've never seen any in person before," he whispered.

The first, large creeper lumbered out from behind the rocks with a steady pace, its four large paws thumping gently against the earth. The little ones, in contrast, ran wild, springing and tumbling all over the place like autumn leaves thrown around by the wind. They rolled and darted between the other's legs, who watched on with a parental fondness that warmed Ant's heart.

The mother picked up one of her babies in her jaws and carried them towards one of the pools, where she then began to drink. One of the kits tried to copy her, only to fall head first into the shallows and initiate a water fight with its siblings.

Antfrost had seen his fair share of creepers since he had come to the SMP, but most of his one on one interactions had been with aggressive males who foolishly decided to mark used mines as their own territory. Those hostile encounters had unfortunately prevented him from studying the peaceful side of them on the field, and he had been forced to rely on books for the most part.

But after setting up a war camp right next to where a mother and her kits were living, the opportunity was too good to miss.

Now he was here, all thoughts of war were banished from his brain and after so long, his academic knowledge trickled back in.

Taking advantage of the moment, Antfrost shuffled closer to Velvet and started to ramble.

"What do you notice about them?" he asked the other.

Velvet squinted at the scene through the thorns for a moment longer. Then, with confidence: "They're very green. Greener than any other creatures I've seen or heard about."

"Yes, they are, aren't they?" Ant agreed. "The creeper's dappled fur is unique. They're nocturnal mobs, but their hide allows them to seek shelter in bushes and thickets during the day. They're the largest creature to have such a bright but effective camouflage. See those markings?"

He pointed at the dark grey stripes running down from the mother's nose and across her jaw.

"Yeah?"

"That's how you can tell what gender they are, along with the ash-like freckles on their body and their claws. Females have grey attributes, while males have black. That one there is definitely a female."

"That's kind of cool, actually. So that's a mother and her babies then?"

"Exactly!"

"Where's the father?"

"Can't say. Male creepers don't stay for long. They mate, take care of their partner until the kits are born, then let the mother raise them on her own and just... leave."

"That's scummy of them. Are there any exceptions?"

"Well, there's Sam."

Velvet snorted and elbowed him in the ribs. "Really?"

Ant chuckled softly. "I'm serious! He's the closest thing we'll ever see to a loyal creeper father."

"Okay, I thought you were being a smartass, but that's actually kind of sweet," Velvet admitted. "I'll make sure to tell him."

"I wonder how that conversation will go. "Hey Sam, turns out, your creeper genes have blessed you with the absence of dickhead parenting. Aren't you a lucky guy?""

The two of them fell about laughing, only stopping when the mother creeper snapped her head up in their direction.

"Oh my gods," Velvet snickered, calming down a little. "Now I want to actually go and tell him that, just to see his reaction."

Ant took a couple of deep breaths to ground himself. "The look on his face would be priceless," he agreed.

Velvet's head turned back to the viewing hole in the thicket, still clearly as enchanted with the creatures as he had been when he had first seen them. "Can we get any closer?"

"Bad idea," the cat quickly interjected. "That's rule one of studying in the field: never try to approach a mother with her babies – *especially* creepers. They're hostile creatures, and she'll most definitely see you as a threat and attack you. And by attack, I mean blow up, taking us, her babies and a good portion of our surroundings with her. They may seem soft and fuzzy, but their defense mechanism has the same blast radius as a stick of dynamite. You don't want to mess with them unless you're properly prepared."

"Yeah, I think I could guess that from the smell."

Velvet wrinkled his nose against the air filled with the creepers' gunpowder stench.

The cat fiddled in the satchel hanging by his side. He took out his journal and a pencil, and opened to a collection of incomplete pages. Right next to a clump of green fur that he had stuck in earlier that day, he started sketching.

He felt Velvet's soft, aquamarine gaze on him as he worked, and could almost see the bright smile that lit up his features. It took all his willpower to stay concentrated, and even more to stay calm and not lash out at his drawing, unsatisfied with it already. It had been ages since he had last actually sat down and updated his research journal.

With the passing years, the once lovely and beautiful leather-bound book with soft cream pages had turned into a decidedly crummy thing. The pages were dog eared, the cover was scratched, and the whole thing reeked of must after being locked away for so long at the bottom of a drawer. It only reminded him how much his life had truly evolved since he first arrived in the SMP, that he had all but abandoned his primary goal to lead a nation and become part of a cult.

"How can you even see in the dark?" Velvet asked, sounding absolutely in awe of him.

"We cats have a remarkable thing called nocturnal vision," Ant hummed, teasing. "You should try it sometime."

"Yeah, but you cough up hairballs. I'll pass, thank you very much."

"You married me," the cat reminded him in a sing-song tone. "My hairballs are your hairballs now."

"Ah, yes. Perhaps I should have read the fine print in the wedding vows."

"Perhaps you should have."

Velvet shuffled closer to him and lay his head on his shoulder, and suddenly Ant's work seemed a little better to his eyes. He glanced down at his page, wondering if he was ever going to get the chance to ink the rough sketch someday.

"They look happy," his husband noted, mindlessly tracing the graphite's tracks.

Antfrost lingered on the family portrait he had created, at the way the younglings pranced across the page like they were prancing across the clearing, and at the way the mother stood tall, proud and protective. Innocence, and pure, powerful beauty.

"They do," he agreed, and closed the journal.

He looked once more between the tendrils, slightly saddened to see the creepers leaving so soon. They stayed in the moonlight for a moment more – the mother briefly glancing their way with a hiss and a snarl – then disappeared back the way they came. As swiftly as their presence had lifted the landscape, their absence was forgotten by the night, and their tracks were erased.

Antfrost inhaled the air one last time, then lay down. The carpet of pine needles pricked him through his fur and dug into his skin. His gaze turned to the treetops and their star-like shadows against the sky.

"You know," he said as Velvet lay down beside him, "I had never seen a creeper kit before."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Well, I had never seen a creeper, full stop, so I guess we both got what we wanted tonight."

"I guess we did."

They didn't say anything for a while, simply basking in the lullaby of the landscape. They could have easily dozed off right there and then, and there was a chance that Velvet was about to, but Ant was preoccupied.

Out of the whole experience, all his mind could replay was the baby creepers. Their mischievous, goofy characters, endearing innocence and playful antics. Kits. Kittens. Children. That, coupled with the mention of Sam, awakened something in Antfrost that he never knew he had in him.

"How would you feel if we started a family?" he suddenly asked aloud.

There was a surprised splutter. "I... uh... You do realize that—"

"I know, but what if we found a way? Would you want a family? With me?"

It was a question they had yet to discuss, namely because neither of them brought it up or showed signs of wanting to talk about such things. However, that was then, and this was now.

Maybe it would be their last chance to fantasize together.

"I mean, if we found a way..."

Velvet tapped his arm. Ant turned to look at him. His husband held his hand and entwined their ring fingers, wedding bands still glimmering just as brightly as they had when they first put them on. He was smiling, with laughing eyes that served as windows to his soul. Ant could already see his answer. He didn't even need to hear it, but gods, he loved Velvet's voice.

"Yes," Velvet whispered. "Yes, I would, more than anything."

And the last piece fell into place. The last ribbon was tied. The last patch was stitched up.

Antfrost felt totally and utterly complete.

Life, so much life. They could have so much life in their own, so much. They could lose it all tomorrow, but tonight, they forgot that.

They forgot the doom and gloom. That night together was all about life, and the joy it brought.

Instead, they dared to dream a little and talk about a future that, one day or another, would come true. If not for them, for someone else.

But again, tonight was just about them. Them and no one else.

From that point on, the last few hours were a little kinder.

Inside one of the tents, in the part of the camp where the Badlands and the Snowchester armies were being housed, Sam was writing.

Perhaps he should have been doing other things on the eve of an all-out war, like praying, sharpening his trident, polishing his armour and getting a good night's sleep.

Well, he had already done most of that – the gods were probably sick of hearing him by now, and his war necessities were already standing to attention on an armour stand, brilliant and gleaming and ready to be soaked by blood in the morning.

But instead of sleeping, he had decided to sit down and write a few things, notably settling an outstanding promise and preparing something else while he was at it.

Something he felt compelled to create and sign off on, just in case.

Just in case.

The armed patrols paced regularly outside the rows of tents, their shadows forming dark clouds over the canvas, momentarily averting Sam's attention from his writing. He'd watch as they'd pass, disturbing the candlelight as they went with their heavy footsteps and ominous parade, then got back to work.

"I thought that everyone agreed to sleep tonight," someone finally scolded him, their teasing tone accompanied by a pair of soft hands that stroked over his shoulders and down his chest.

Sam grinned and looked up. "Yes, they did, didn't they? So what are you still doing up and about?"

Puffy smiled back, nuzzling his cheek. "Waiting for you, of course. I need my hot, personal heating pad. The mountains are cold at night."

To drive her point further, she dragged her hands under his shirt and up his spine. Her fingers were like ice, as cold as death, and made him jolt abruptly. He dropped his pen.

"Gods, Puffy!" he yelped with a laugh, twisted his body around to face her and her wry smile.

"Aw, is someone ticklish?"

"No, but you're freezing!"

"Exactly my point. You're supposed to warm me up, so I'm not budging until you do."

"Until then, grow a proper fleece or put on something a bit warmer." He ran a fold of her night robe through his fingers, smirking when she leaned her waist into his hand. "Or maybe the warmth isn't the only thing you're so eager to get, hm?"

"Shut up," she laughed, cheeks burning. She draped herself across his back and buried her face in the crook of his neck. "What are you writing?"

He looked back at the table. "Just... things."

She hummed and began to pepper him with affection, in an effort to coerce him into spilling the beans. "What kind of things?"

He couldn't exactly resist her. "I wrote to my friends in the redstone academies about Fundy," he explained, signing the top paper with a flourish and putting it aside to dry. "I'm going to send that off in the morning, if one of Phil's crows is up for the trip."

"Mhm." Puffy kissed his cheek as a thank you for his answer. "And what's the other one?"

She gently moved his hand and tapped the couple of pages of parchment underneath.

Sam hesitated, biting the inside of his cheek. "That's, uh, something."

"Private?"

"Not exactly."

"Can I read it?"

Sam had always thought that such a thing would be shared when he was dead and gone. But then again, he couldn't refuse his beloved, and he eventually agreed with a silent nod.

Puffy carefully took the papers, making sure not to smudge the ink. She began to read aloud. "'To whomever it may concern, friend or foe...'"

Sam tuned her out. He leaned forwards, elbows propped on his knees and his hands clasped, staring off into the dancing orange shadow of an outside torch against the canvas walls of their tent.

He didn't want to hear it, any of it. He had written it, and that was that. He wasn't meant to read it, or even set eyes on it ever again. It wasn't meant for him anymore.

The lines upon lines of pure, unfiltered honesty were no longer for his eyes.

The brief snippets he heard from Puffy – with repeated words like "remorse", "regret", "sorry" – were no longer for his ears.

The thoughts that he had poured out onto the page were no longer for his mind, to be confined to a prison of ink and paper as long as he was still alive.

He was good at creating prisons, but maybe not so great at guarding them, keeping what was inside at bay.

Come what may.

At one point, Puffy's voice faltered and faded, drawing his attention to her. Her eyes continued to skim his writing, glistening, and she absorbed the rest in silence. A minute or two later, she backed away and sat down on the bed – a creaky, temporary little thing for that night – still glued to the pages. She clapped a hand to her mouth, tears streaming.

Sam had promised himself that he wouldn't intervene, but he couldn't bear to see Puffy cry, and immediately went over to comfort her, guilt eating him alive at the certainty that he had caused it. "Darling?"

"It's just..." She sniffed, letting out a choked laugh when he wiped one of her tears away with his thumb. She set the papers aside. "It's just beautiful and sad, and... Gods, this just made everything real to me..."

"I'm sorry..."

She shook her head and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I just had to get it all out," Sam sighed, in a last attempt to explain himself. "I had to write everything down, and I mean everything. The good and the bad... just everything. I don't want people to only remember me with tall, heroic tales. I want my memory to be as close to the truth as possible. I want them to know everything, no matter how beautiful or ugly. I want to be remembered as someone real."

"Sam, do you think you're going to die tomorrow?"

He couldn't answer her.

"Tell me the truth."

He couldn't answer her *honestly*, not without reducing them both to piles of more tears and pain.

"I can't," he whispered hoarsely.

Puffy didn't push him any further, and only pulled him towards her until their foreheads touched. He closed his eyes.

They sat like that for a while, in a heavy silence only broken up by the passing soldiers outside.

Sam looked over at the nearest candle. It had almost burned out completely, the wax no more than a blunt stump, the flame ready to die with nothing but a gust of wind.

Frail, mortal, temporary, just like everything else in the camp that evening was. Everything, except for his own feelings.

"I want you to know that I've never regretted any of this," he whispered, gesturing to the intimacy between them. "Loving you. You have no idea how precious you are to me."

Puffy smiled, her eyes still closed. "I've already got a good idea from your... testament."

His "testament", for lack of a better word. Somehow, it seemed far more dark and daunting.

He took a deep breath.

"Puffy, I—"

She looked up, and his tongue tied.

I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

Something stopped him from finishing his sentence. A tight coil of doubt in his chest, snaking around his lungs and blocking his throat, rendering him completely unable to utter a single word. He couldn't even look her in the eyes, anxious thoughts starting to torment him yet again.

Why was he so scared of saying a simple sentence? It was a trivial little thing, so why was he so utterly scared?

Because it's more than just a sentence.

It was a question in disguise, one that would be the make or break of everything he held dear. On the eve of a great battle, he hadn't amassed enough courage to ask it aloud. He couldn't bring himself to.

Instead, he leaned down and kissed her ring finger, hoping, praying that she would understand.

She tilted her head to the side and watched him without a word.

His heart sank, and he sighed. "Nevermind," he mumbled. "It's nothing."

"No, Sam. It's a lot, I know." She made him look at her. For a brief moment, his heart jump started with an ounce of hope that she understood. "I'm scared too."

"You... you are?"

"I am. This war... It's not like the others, I can feel it."

And it sank again. He slumped into her touch, defeated. "Yeah..."

"We're all scared, and it's alright."

That wasn't what Sam meant, and he quickly locked up the question in the back of his mind where it belonged. Everything was counting on their victory tomorrow. There was no use in rushing ahead when the future might not even come for them.

"Do you think you're going to die tomorrow?" he couldn't help but ask her.

"Who knows?" She gave him a forced smile, painted by dread and a haunting worry, and held his hands in her lap. "But if I had to die right now, at this very moment, I wouldn't be scared. I've known true completeness with you, and if that's the last thing I carry with me when I leave, I'd be happy."

He didn't deserve her, he really didn't, and his head wouldn't stop reminding him of that fact. His heart, on the other hand, begged to differ. It was a painful dilemma, but one that only reminded him how much she meant to him.

He brought her into his arms and hugged her tightly, unwilling to let her go. If he did, he feared that it would be the end, that it would be over, that one way or another, he'd lose her for good. He wouldn't survive the loss. He couldn't live with half of him torn away.

"We never really thought this through, did we?" Puffy said with a strained laugh, pulling away and gently tracing his face with her index. "Me and you, together. This is the SMP, and we decided to forget that."

"We chose to forget the horrors to be happy," Sam reminded her. "And that's worth everything."

"Now the pain of eventually losing one another will be greater."

When they would lose everything, once again. The threat was so painfully normal.

"If an eternity of grief is the price to pay for having you in my life," Sam whispered, "then I'll welcome it with open arms."

With those same arms, he gently lifted her up and pulled her onto his lap. She was so small, so gorgeous, so adoring in his embrace. Her cheeks were dusted with a light, cherry blush. Her hands were cold, yes, but made of velvet and cotton.

She was perfect in his arms and pressed against him. So perfect. She was made for him, and he for her.

He wanted to hold, cherish and love her until the day he died and beyond. She was more precious than the greatest treasure, more divine than the gods, and more heavenly than the stars.

"You're my world," he whispered, choking as tears started to form. He hid them by turning his attention to every part of her he could love, pressing kisses everywhere and feeling his heart swell with every soft sigh she let out in response. The grip of his hands that ran up and down her body became tighter, desperate even. "My queen, my angel, my captain, so beautiful and strong..."

Her fingers thread themselves into his hair and scratched the nape of his neck, unsure whether to egg him on or make him stop. "Sam..."

"Mhm?" he mumbled against her shoulder.

"You do realize that these tents are thin, right?"

"I don't care."

"And Ant and Velvet could come back at any moment."

He cast a side-eyed glance to the other side of the tent, where two packs and a collection of armour and weapons were abandoned. The beds weren't even set up or made yet. Sam had a feeling that tonight, they were alone.

"I don't care," he repeated, turning his full attention back to Puffy. "I want you, please. Let me love you one last time before... before..."

"Before we fall." She pushed his head up from her collarbone and held his gaze.

He swallowed hard and nodded. "Before we fall."

A brief silence stretched between them, where all he could hear was his heart thrumming in his ears and his fears eating him alive.

"If you die on me tomorrow, I'll kill you," Puffy threatened against his lips, eyes fluttering shut.

"You're going to be the death of me anyway, darling."

"That, or the cold will get to me first."

"Well, then better warm you up, shouldn't we?"

He kissed her with an ardour that whisked their breaths clean away.

They never parted, even when Sam gently lay her down and shifted his weight on top. The golden candlelight basked the edges of his vision, narrowing the world until there was only Puffy. Only her, and only him. As a dreamy, blissful haze began to overcome them both, he allowed himself one last, sane thought.

One last night.

Sam promised himself he'd love her forever. He had never wanted eternity to last for as long as he did then.

"After ages of searching, I've finally found them."

"Found what?"

"The treasure we've been looking for."

Philza brandished a small, golden object. True to his word, it gleamed in the light of the fire pit like shimmering treasure, and Technoblade's eyes went wide.

"At last," he breathed, beckoning the avian closer. With trembling fingers, he took the bounty from him and inhaled its scent. Paradise, absolute paradise. "After all this time... I take it back, this army does have a bit of taste."

"Even if they store that taste in the very last bloody bag I checked in the last bloody food cart," Phil sighed, dumping the rest of the sack between them. He flopped down on a log beside Techno and took off his hat.

"The very last one? Are you telling me that they cast aside these beauties in favour of that flavourless stew?"

"Seems like it."

"May the gods help them," Techno sighed dramatically, taking out a knife and starting to cut up the potato.

He offered another blade to Philza, who took it and started to do the same.

For a while, that's all they did, in a warm, comfortable silence. Just two good friends dicing up vegetables and adding them to the bubbling pot hanging over the flames. The smoke and delicious scent of their cooking rose up into the air, snaking through the maze of stars scattered around the dark, open sky.

Technoblade took a moment to just sit and take it all in, senses drawn to every little detail like moths to flames. He let the relaxing atmosphere soak into his skin and seep down into his bones. It was the best kind of cleansing he could ever get, purifying his body before he'd be inevitably soiled by blood the next day and lengthen his list of sins.

It was so relaxing, so soothing. For the first time in ages, Technoblade felt well and truly safe. Oh sure, their enemies were probably camping just on the other side of the battlefield, but Techno felt safe at that moment.

Dare he even say, vulnerable.

"I'm on my last life."

He heard a knife drop. "I... what?"

"I'm on my last life," Techno repeated, then glanced across at his friend.

Phil was staring at him with wide, shocked eyes, a gaping mouth and a frozen body. "You're joking, right?"

In any other situation, Technoblade would have said yes. Tonight was different. He was feeling vulnerable. "I'm not. I'm on my last life."

From the reaction he got from Phil, he may as well have told him that the world was about to end. "No, that's impossible! I've never seen you... You never... How many lives did you start with?!"

"Three, like everyone."

"But... how—"

"Dumb things, mostly, usually in my younger years," Techno shrugged. "Like the time you lost one of yours to that baby zombie."

"Don't start on that again—"

"Well you shouldn't have told me about that! I'll never let you live it down, mark my words."

Philza was fuming. "Techno! This isn't about me! What about you and your lives?!"

Technoblade knew that he should have given Philza a word or two of comfort, anything to reassure him. Maybe he should have told him it was a joke.

But no.

He wanted to finally spill the truth. There was no going back now.

"I almost lost them all a year or two back," he admitted, "but the totem at my execution saved me. Those things are great. Single-use, but great. In hindsight, that's probably how Dream summoned most of his army."

"You never told me." Philza sounded betrayed beyond belief, and Technoblade couldn't blame him.

"I never told anyone," he assured him. "Honestly, I'm glad I didn't. I've found it a lot more strategic to push "Technoblade never dies" into the rumours rather than "Technoblade only has one life, bon appétit", y'know? Throw enemies off their rhythm by terrifying them rather than openly admitting that any battle could be my last. Including this upcoming one."

"Techno, we've got to tell someone, anyone!" The avian sprung to his feet, wings flapping frantically as he began to trip his way towards the nearest row of tents.

"Someone we trust to keep it low! We could get you a battalion to fight with you and make sure you stay safe—"

Techno didn't follow him. "Phil—"

"You're our best asset! We can't lose you!"

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow, smirking. "Is that the only reason you're so desperate to keep me alive?"

"Right now, yeah!"

The piglin laughed loudly. "Angel of Death? More like Angel of Commitment Issues."

Philza abruptly turned back to him, eyes blazing. Full of anger, yes, but deep worry too. "You're my best friend, is that what you want to hear?"

Techno smiled. "Now you know how I feel every time you throw yourself headfirst into danger with one life."

"It's not the same thing," Phil whispered, sheepishly heading back over to the fire, tired and defeated. He collapsed onto his log again, holding his head.

"How so?"

"It's just... not."

"We're both on our last lives."

"Yes, but I can count in centuries. You—"

"I may not be old by your standards, Phil, but I am by mine and others'. I've been on my last life for decades, and I think I've done pretty well for myself."

"Still, I..." Phil held his head in his hands. "I can't lose you, Techno. I've lost my sons, the love of my life... everyone. You're my best friend. I love you, and I can't lose you."

Vulnerable.

They both were.

Two legends, feared fighters, builders and destructors of entire empires, vulnerable with each other and when faced with an army like all the others. The undead soldiers and their leaders were hungry, out for revenge, and ready to do whatever it took to get to their goal. One blow could strike Techno and Phil down so easily, too easily for comfort.

"I have something to give you," Techno ventured, staring off into the fire. "It's not much, but it might be of use."

By "being of use", Techno meant "able to reassure them both".

"What is it?"

The piglin moved away a fold of his cloak and took out a horn, carved from cream-coloured ivory. He handed it to Phil, and turned back to the fire.

He found comfort in the flames. In the way they danced like nymphs and faeries, spat like cobras, rose and fell like the ocean tides. So much life was held in such little, man-made things.

"A horn?" Philza questioned. "What for?"

"Just in case," Techno replied with a low voice.

"In case—"

"In case we're in danger, and we need help. In case you need to call me, or I need to call you." He showed his own horn, identical to Phil's. "So we're linked no matter what."

"And a sign to keep fighting for each other, no matter what."

Techno nodded and kept staring off into the fire pit, entranced by the bubbling potatoes and the flames that licked the cauldron. His hand found its way to his own horn, digging his fingers into the grooves and ridges of the intricate carving. He traced the small, mean eye of the beast whose gaping mouth would roar the alarm. He could almost hear it, already ringing in his ears.

Technoblade heard Philza fasten the gift and its leather strap to his belt, then shuffle across until his head rested against the piglin's shoulder.

He looked across. Philza smiled back at him with a face so young, and eyes so old.

Technoblade always marvelled at how far they had come. Their first encounter, as he recalled, was far from pleasant.

It had taken place in a vast arctic land, far away from the SMP.

Techno was branded a villain, an outlaw, and was feared and fabled across the land. He was alone with the voices, sure, but he did manage to make the most of his predicament. No one dared approach him, or cut off his path. He could eat where he wanted, slept where he pleased, took whatever armour or weapons he needed and was

never asked to pay. Once or twice, a particularly brave battalion tried to capture him. He had been quick to make them regret it.

However, such a reputation soon became a curse, and he could only run for so long. All his dues in blood and money soon caught up with him, in the form of a curse. It was placed upon him by an enchantress he had foolishly chosen to challenge, and had been deemed irreversible.

Technoblade the man turned into Technoblade the beast, and the violent instincts kicked in quickly.

Phil had first come across Techno in an ice cave deep in a snowy valley, clawing at the walls with his four limbs, goreing the ice with his tusks, snarling and roaring until even the unmovable mountains trembled and avalanches cascaded down from their peaks.

Technoblade was vicious and wary, able only to insult and threaten in grunts and growls.

And yet, Philza was patient with him.

The avian fed him, talked to him, tried to calm him, and persuaded the new, aggressive piglin that he was here as a friend.

In time, Techno found his voice again, his legs, his mannerisms and his mind. He learned to control his new and unfamiliar instincts. He was healed, as far as regaining his senses went. He was ready to march off and find new adventures.

He was free to do as he pleased, but he stayed with the Angel of Death. They built an empire on a whim, deep in that arctic tundra. They were happy for a while. The voices were too, satisfied with their new friend.

And as all stories went, it soon came to an end. They split up again, but not without a promise of undying friendship and gratitude.

Then, years later, Technoblade stumbled across Phil again, with a family this time. A sensitive, musical son of the avian's own flesh and blood, and two younger gremlins with snotty noses and gapped teeth. They lived in a nice little house together, with a quaint little farm and countless days of childhood bliss.

Techno stayed for a bit there too, forming bonds he never thought would end up going past the stage of "these are just my best friend's children".

Again, the page turned a little too soon, and Technoblade, Wilbur, Tommy and Tubbo were thrown into a world of war, chaos, lies, deceit – fully cementing Techno's hate for government. His divorce with nations, kingdoms and all those who were unlucky enough to function like them was settled for good.

But through it all, Philza was there, physically and in spirit. Through it all, the promises they had made to each other years and years ago were still just as strong and sacred. They always wore them with pride in the form of two emerald pendants. They were exact replicas, never to be taken off, cast aside, broken or forgotten.

Their bond was eternal.

"For you, Phil, the world," Technoblade promised once again, on that eve proceeding yet another bloodbath.

"The world, mate." Philza draped one of his big, back wings around them both. "The world, and more besides."

Nikki was not looking forward to tomorrow. No one was, of course, but especially not her.

Yes, she had fought in multiple wars before. Yes, she was skilled enough to stay alive. She just didn't want to take part in this particular battle.

Wilbur had welcomed her into L'Manberg with open arms and a bright smile, following an awkward pick-up and date that never actually led anywhere than to a strong friendship. Nevertheless, he still affectionately nicknamed her "his first lady". She was the first woman to join the nation's ranks, and he had made sure she was respected every step of the way.

Wilbur was the best friend she could have ever asked for. He was kind, caring, genuine and bold, a born leader with a strong sense of compassion that she really liked. Wilbur was what made her fight for L'Manberg as valiantly as she had – it was important to him, and she wanted him to be happy.

She just wanted him to be *happy*.

Had that been too much to ask?

She had tried for so long, sacrificed so much, and even almost got executed by Schlatt's dictatorship for publicly defying his orders. She did it all for Wilbur, and for what?

For him to *kill* himself.

He killed himself, and nothing she did had prevented it.

The moment he was gone, she had turned on L'Manberg. There was nothing more tying her to it. She tried to hide her waning loyalties, at first. She still attended meetings, helped rebuild, and tried to give herself a new, peaceful life with a potential partner, Captain Puffy.

None of that ever worked out, and perhaps it was for the best.

On Doomsday, she burned the only remaining symbol, the L'Mantree, and felt nothing. She joined the Syndicate, hiding a violent sense of inadequacy and failure behind sweet smiles and pastries.

Technoblade had never understood why she was among them in the first place, and she never told him.

It was her secret, and she had her reasons.

She just wanted to make the world a happy place, but that same world fought her every step of the way.

The upcoming battle was only going to make things worse. Wilbur was alive, but he was an enemy. She was going to have to fight him, maybe even kill him once again.

She wanted no part of that, but she wasn't a coward. She wasn't going to run. She just promised herself that she'd purposely avoid him at all costs. Even a single, shared look could be her downfall.

She didn't want to kill her best friend.

She didn't want to kill *Wilbur*.

It sounded so easy.

Nikki couldn't sleep. She tried, but everything felt wrong, from the whistling wind outside to the itchy blankets laid over her. In the end, she got up and decided to take a walk.

It had been an aimless promenade at first, just a way for her to clear her head. Soon enough, her mind started to swim, clogged by dark thoughts and fears for the morrow.

She hadn't opened up to someone for ages, and the floodgates were close to breaking open. She needed to drain it all, one way or another.

As she walked around, she reviewed her surroundings, and thus her possibilities.

Puffy immediately jumped to mind, but was quickly dismissed. Although they were only friends now, Nikki had a feeling that some sort of sentiment or vulnerability would leak through, rendering her unable to deal with things properly. She didn't want to accidentally hurt Puffy with her words, which judging by the build up, could potentially be sharp and jarring.

Then, she thought of Velvet. However, she had seen him follow Antfrost up into the slopes a little while ago, and it definitely wasn't her place to intrude on what could potentially be a couple's last night together.

Fundy was also a possibility. Wilbur's own son that she had closely bonded with. They had a lot in common, especially regarding L'Manberg's fall and Wilbur himself. Yet, when she approached his tent, the lights were off and she could just barely hear him snoring.

Following Fundy, Philza and Technoblade briefly crossed her mind. She cast them aside as well. Too grief-stricken and biased, and too stoic and indifferent to last-minute doubts.

That did leave her with one option, that she saved for last. A cocky, smug idiot that had created a hundred and one reasons for her to despise him in the past. That said, as the Red Banquet had shown, they did make a pretty good team.

She did go back and grab her sword, however, just in case she needed to blackmail or put him in his place.

All in good fun, of course.

Mostly in good fun. He still grinded her gears now and then.

Kinoko Kingdom's side of the camp was the easiest to pick out. While the other nations privileged practicality with tents of strong, supple canvas that withstood most of the elements, Kinoko had used what they had at their disposal: silk. A lot of silk.

Walking into that part of the larger camp was a shock to Nikki's senses. The rows of brightly coloured tents gave the area a luxurious, relaxed feel. She felt like she was walking into a magical fair rich with mysterious fortune-tellers, tarot decks and ancient but powerful talismans, not into an army's barracks.

It didn't take her long to locate Sapnap. She found him outside the largest of the tents on the outskirts of the rest, seated on a tree stump and busy sharpening his sword on a small grinding stone, sending sparks up into the air.

She greeted him from afar and to her relief, he smiled and waved her over.

"Alright, something's wrong," he guessed straight away, as soon as she was close enough. "It's way past midnight and you've come to see me with no treats or jokes at my expense."

"Wow," she sighed, rolling her eyes and sitting beside him on the grass. "Are your expectations for me really that low?"

"I've just noticed a pattern," he replied with a smug grin. "So, to what do I owe this displeasure?"

"Displeasure?"

"Yes, displeasure. You barge into my camp, roll your eyes at me, squat on my turf and you didn't even bring any cookies."

He turned to her with an over-exaggerated pout and wide, pathetic puppy eyes.

She shook her head and scoffed. "I was unaware that your company required a fee."

"So you want my company!" Sapnap stopped the grindstone. "That's... kind of sad. Are you alright?"

This time, he sounded actually concerned, and Nikki dropped her smile. She briefly looked behind her, attempting to peer into the tent. She didn't exactly want their conversation to be witnessed, or to disturb any sleeping fighters.

"Where's Karl?" she asked.

Sapnap jerked his head to the side, towards the arid, rocky wilderness that lay beyond their side of the camp. In the distance, Nikki could just make out two figures huddled on the ground with their backs pressed against a large rock.

"He's talking to George," the fireborn told her. "Trying to get him into the right mindset for tomorrow. It's not going to be a fun battle, I can tell you that much."

At the slight wobble in his tone and the sadness gradually overcoming his eyes, Nikki softened. "How so?"

"Well first off, George is more of a lover than a fighter." Here, Sapnap seemed to have regained some of his upbeat attitude. It disappeared soon after. "And then... there's the question of whom we're fighting."

Suddenly, Nikki understood. "Dream, right?"

Sapnap nodded, and abandoned his weapon off to the side as if he never wanted to touch it again. "It's not going to be fun..."

"I actually wanted to talk to you about something like that."

"Really?"

"I don't want to fight Wilbur tomorrow."

"Ah. So I was right about something being off."

They sat in complete and utter silence for a while, both of them mulling deeply over thoughts and memories and painfully trying to find the courage to harden their minds against them.

"You know, Dream was my best friend," Sapnap eventually began. "Me, him and George were unstoppable. We were the Dream Team. We were everything to each other. And then Clay— Dream became a monster. It happened so suddenly, and we had no idea why. One minute he was our friend, and the next I was leaping out of a Nether portal to arrest him and help lock him up in Pandora's Vault."

He stared off into the distance with his knees brought up to his chest. Nikki had nothing to say, and simply listened.

It seemed like she wasn't the only one who just needed to talk.

"Even despite everything, I owe him a lot. He saved me from a life of slavery, he gave me a proper home when no one did, he made me laugh, promised us a new, happy life, and kept us together. And George, well, that's another story. They were just a little more than friends, sometimes, and I think that's what's upsetting him the most."

"So what about tomorrow?" Nikki couldn't help but ask. She needed some sort of guidance, any kind of food for thought she could chew and digest, ready for the morning.

"What about it? We've just got to fight the enemy."

"But, you said that Dream—"

"People change, Nikki, and sometimes we're forced to change with them."

Sapnap shrugged, trying to seem indifferent, but she could tell that there was a titanium weight on his shoulders.

"He's the enemy now," he continued, "and we can't forget that. We can afford to forget everything else, but not that. Once he was good, but those days are gone now. Some things are unforgivable."

Unforgivable.

Nikki had no idea how a single word allowed her to start seeing Wilbur in a new light, but it did.

Unforgivable.

"I'm assuming that's your dilemma too, right? With Wilbur?"

She nodded in response, mind still whirring. "You could say that..."

A warm, friendly shoulder nudged hers. "I've never said this enough, or at all, but you're a strong warrior, Nikki. Stronger and bolder than you think, or what others say. You really are."

The good-natured compliment only cemented the nightmarish images in her mind. Her sword plunged through Wilbur's throat, wide, terrified eyes pleading for her forgiveness.

Unforgivable.

They both would be, no matter what happened.

"So, how are we feeling?"

"Scared shitless. What about you, Tommy?"

Tubbo and Ranboo turned as one to look at him. Tommy pondered the question for a minute or two, then finally resigned himself.

"Confident," he replied with a determined nod.

"Confident about what?"

"Confident that we'll win. We'll beat that green bastard, no matter what."

"Now where have I heard those words before?" Tubbo grinned, propping his head in his hand.

"What? It's true. We've beaten him before, and we'll do it again."

"It still seems a little dangerous," Ranboo admitted.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Of course you'd say that."

"It's just... I haven't been in a proper battle before." The hybrid looked down and fiddled with his long fingers.

"You literally helped defeat the Eggpire."

Ranboo perked up again. "That was different," he protested. "I wasn't fighting. I was just helping people get out because Nikki didn't want me to get hurt."

"But you still witnessed a battle."

"But I haven't fought in one before." He looked down again, eyes veiled with shame. "I was a bystander for the Butcher Army, a coward during Doomsday and the siege on the Vault, and an usher during the Red Banquet. I've never really had to fight properly before."

If the mood was a little lighter, Tommy would have laughed loudly, slapped him on the back and called him a pussy.

Instead, he mustered up his most sympathetic smile and lay a hand on Ranboo's shoulder. "Techno trained you though," he pointed out. "You're probably more skilled than me and Tubbo combined, even if you've never used them before."

"Yeah," Tubbo butted in, demonstrating with some sick karate moves. "You're the Blade 2.0 for all we know!"

That did make Ranboo smile, and he looked at them fondly. "Thanks guys. I bet you're pretty cool in battle too."

"Oh, absolutely."

"We're basically gods."

Ranboo laughed, "I know you are."

Tommy's chest swelled up with pride. "That's right, bitch."

Tubbo drummed his fingers against the table. "So, I'll ask again: how are we feeling?"

"Still scared shitless, but a little more confident," Ranboo replied with a shrug.

"Still confident," reiterated Tommy, "but a little scared."

"Yeah, I'm with Tommy on that one," Tubbo agreed. "We're on our last ones, and I mean last last ones."

Tommy frowned. That small detail was something he had been trying to forget. "If we do die, then it's game over for us, for good this time."

All three of them said nothing.

If they were going to kill Dream tomorrow, then there was definitely no way to come back this time – none at all. For them, and for others.

Tommy took a moment to think deeply, and began to wonder for the first time how many lives each of his friends and allies had.

How many would die for good on the battlefield tomorrow?

How many would get injured?

How many would he never see or talk to again?

"Until then, how about we live a little?" Tubbo interrupted with a cough, breaking Tommy's melancholic train of thought.

The ram heaved a small barrel into the table, along with three brass tankards beaten up and scratched from use. He fiddled with the small wooden tap on the keg and filled one of them with a golden, frothing beverage before handing it to Tommy.

Tommy sniffed the contents of his tankard, and screwed up his face in disgust. "Beer?"

"I snagged it from the Temple's food supplies," Tubbo agreed, pouring two more pints and passing one to Ranboo. "They've got the best barley in the whole SMP, so people say."

The hybrid looked down at the beer, visibly a little nervous. "Are we *allowed* to drink this?"

"Gods, Ranboo, we're literally about to kill people tomorrow and you're worried about the legality of drinking a little spirit." Tubbo thrust his pint up high, raising a toast. "Bottoms up, boys. Here's to glory."

Ranboo's tankard came to join his a moment later. "Here's to victory."

Tommy paused, and thought for a moment. "Here's to our friendship," he finally decided.

Tubbo smiled. "Here's to our friendship," he agreed, "still standing strong despite everything."

"To our friendship," Ranboo added.

They clinked their drinks together and took a large swig. Tommy gagged almost immediately. It tasted like piss, for lack of a better description, and Tommy had a hard time swallowing it. Even then, the beer left a bitter aftertaste on his tongue. He silently cursed out the tasteless motherfucker who had first had the delusional idea of making this, and to all those after that kept up its popularity.

"Despite everything, like Tubbo exiling me like a prick or Ranboob being himself, I wouldn't trade you guys for the world," Tommy told them, desperate to gulp down some fresh air and fill his mouth with something sweeter. Even if that meant being sappy in the process.

"Yeah, Tommy," Tubbo snickered. "I think that's the alcohol talking."

"I don't know, Tubbo, he did call me 'Ranboob'," Ranboo pointed out. "That seems like a pretty sober choice to me."

All three burst out laughing, and Tommy felt good. He wasn't scared, worried or dreading the morning as he was certain many were. He wasn't even filled with rage, or a desire for bloody revenge, at least not then.

Right now, everything felt nice and cosy, like a warm hug – even if the beer tasted like shit.

He missed the camaraderie and the unity, sharing food and stories around a fire and forgetting, for an evening, that some may never come back.

History was repeating itself, and this time, Tommy didn't mind.

The night was still young, as were the three of them. Despite the talk of war, they didn't want to forget that. For the first and perhaps last time in forever, Tommy allowed himself to feel it.

Just simply feel the youth he had never had the time to appreciate.

Purpled woke up suddenly to a deafening crash.

He sat upright in his bed, covers thrown over his knees, sweat trickling down his neck, and his hair a mess. Wide eyes surveyed his surroundings, momentarily lingering on the empty bunk across from him.

He immediately feared the worst.

"Shit!"

He leapt up, threw on the first shirt he could find, grabbed his sword and burst out of the tent. The camp was completely quiet and above all, dark. All the torches had been extinguished, and the fires trampled out. The only source of light came from the moon, which proved fruitless in the pitch black shadows of the mountains.

It didn't take Purpled long to find the trail, however, and he followed it with the stealth of an assassin. He weaved in and out of the other tents, and was surprised to find it in the opposite direction to where they stored their food. Instead, it seemed to be leading away from the camp, before stopping at a slope made up of large, smooth boulders.

A silhouette came into view, scrambling up a particularly slippery side, hooves scraping against the rock and grunting from the effort.

Purpled let out a sigh of relief and put away his weapon. "I honestly thought you went off to get drunk again," he scoffed.

Schlatt turned around at the sound of the hunter's voice, and Purpled face fell. A bag was slung over his shoulder, and the ram had donned a lightweight suit of chainmail armour, a sight never seen before. Instead of an unsettling smirk or a furious scowl, Schlatt's mouth was partly open and inhaling ragged breaths, sweat dripping down his face, plastering his hair against his scalp.

Purpled's surprise turned into suspicion. "Schlatt?"

Schlatt rolled his eyes. "Do you ever sleep?" he grumbled, then went back to his ascent.

In a flash, Purpled yanked him down and threw him to the floor. The satchel slipped open and a number of items spilled out. Schlatt rushed to gather them all up again, cursing as he went. Purpled on the other hand simply stood there, staring at the scene in shock.

Golden apples, food, a gourd, pouches of stray gold coins and emerald shards, a dagger...

"Schlatt? What the *fuck* are you doing?"

Still on his hands and knees, the ram shot him a dirty look. "What does it look like, kid? I'm making a smart decision."

Purpled couldn't believe his eyes, nor his ears. "You're running away," he realized.

Schlatt gathered up the last of his supplies and began stuffing them all back in his bag. "Listen," he huffed, "I'm just using my brain, alright? I know how these things go."

"You're... running away..."

It was hard to breathe.

"It's going to be a massacre, Purpled, mark my words, and I ain't gonna be a part of it."

Something sharp jabbed Purpled right in his core and for the first time, he knew what betrayal was.

And desperation.

And a violent anger that would have allowed him to split the mountain chain in two with nothing but a single blow from his sword.

He lunged and shoved Schlatt against the nearest boulder, his fist bunching up the front of his shirt. He got up right in the ram's face, forcing him to face his fury.

"You're fucking running away!"

"Shut it! Do you want the whole world to wake up?"

Maybe he did, maybe it should, just so it could witness the backstabbing for itself.

"We had a deal, Schlatt!" Purpled yelled, shaking him violently. *"A deal!"*

"Did you not hear me?! Shut up!"

"You know what you are?! You're a coward! You're a fucking cow—"

Something hard and heavy slapped across his face and sucked his words right out of his mouth. He let go of Schlatt and stumbled backwards, his skin on fire. A wet and sticky stream trickled down from his nose and onto a swollen lip, filling his mouth with the sickening taste of blood.

Through watering eyes, Purpled stared up at the ram. Not glared, but simply stared. He was too startled to do anything else.

Schlatt rubbed his knuckles and got back to his feet, his fear now fully morphed into a pinched scowl. The blazing wrath that the hunter had stirred up was that of a dragon, almost as strong to rival Purpled's own.

Schlatt spat on the floor. "Screw that deal, and screw the lot of you! Why would I fight for anyone of you fuckers? None of you fought for me!"

He thrust a hand behind him, pointing back to a moment in the past, long gone but never forgotten.

"All those people watched me die, and no one helped. Not one! I was dying of a fucking heart attack and no one did anything. They didn't even shoot me or cut me down to make it quicker. They didn't do *shit!* "

Schlatt took a step towards Purpled, and the hunter took two steps back, still clutching his face.

It was pathetic of him, and he knew that. He could have lashed back, fought back, cut the traitor down where he stood.

But Schlatt had punched him.

He had punched him with a gargantuan show of strength that the hunter had never, ever expected to see from the so-called wet, useless excuse for a dictator.

Clearly, the ram's strength did not solely rest within bureaucracy and vile orders. He had been grossly underestimated many times, and Purpled had made the mistake to push him to that physical power.

So Purpled didn't and couldn't do anything, except face the consequences of his actions.

"And another thing," Schlatt continued. "Let's imagine that these rebels of yours do help turn the war on its head, and the SMP wins. What will happen to us? Oh, you're already beloved – everyone's favourite little bounty hunter, aren't you? Knowing you, most people wouldn't have even known that you were dead in the first place. You'll be celebrated as a fucking hero. What about me? You think that I can just waltz in there and get fucking forgiven, after everything? They hate me, Purpled, and they always will. Nothing's gonna ever change there."

Purpled searched for something to say, he really did. Even if it was something small he could use to contradict Schlatt.

He came up dry. Completely and utterly empty.

"You also wanted to know about Puffy, didn't you? Here's the deal: Tubbo's my son. My bloody *son*. Even if the whole world forgives me, he won't. He's got his father's hot head, and he's never gonna change his mind about any of that."

And just like that, the aggression disappeared.

Schlatt's anger slowly but surely began to crumble, turning into a relaxed indifference with a dead look and pursed lips.

Even in the most touching, private and vulnerable moments of his life, Schlatt was incapable of true and utter sadness.

Perhaps Purpled and him weren't so different after all.

"You're selfish," the hunter hissed, wiping the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. "You're selfish and a coward."

"Maybe I am," Schlatt replied. "Dream gave me a second chance at life, and I'm gonna do what I want with it. Not what *he* wants, not what *you* think we should do, but what *I* want."

He looked behind him, at the sloping rocks. There was no telling what lay on the other side, and Purpled had to admit that a fresh start had never sounded more appealing.

"I'm gonna get myself a new life, somewhere away from all of this. I want to be forgotten by all of you."

"But—"

Schlatt looked at him long and hard. "You gave me the permission to run if I wanted to, and I've taken you up on the offer."

Again, Purpled wished he could contradict him.

"Nothing's stopping you from running away."

If anything, everything was pushing Schlatt to run, and try as he might, Purpled could find no reason to hold him back.

None at all.

And that lifted a huge weight off his shoulders.

He wasn't a leader, but he had learned the basics while working closely with the infamous trio of Dream, Wilbur and Schlatt. He had a practically foolproof plan up his sleeve. He had the skills. His army of rebels trusted him.

Yes, Purpled was a lone wolf, but he was a proud and capable one.

"Fine," he growled, standing up straight and placing a hand on the pommel of his sword. "Leave if you want to. No one can stop you."

No one ever could.

Schlatt seemed surprised for a moment, then he relaxed into a grin. "Good luck, kid."

Purpled had never heard a sentence filled with so much insincerity. It cracked him up, and he smiled too. "Good luck to you too," he replied, matching the other's tone.

There had never been any true friendship between them, and there never would be. They were business partners, and nothing more. Until the end.

Schlatt shrugged his satchel into a more comfortable position and brushed some of the stray locks of hair out of his face. He then turned around and braced himself, before using his powerful sheep-like legs to get a head start on his ascent. He continued up and up without a single backwards glance. He disappeared over the top a couple of minutes later.

And just like that, Schlatt was out of the SMP's history, for good this time.

Purpled watched him go, then he too turned around and left. He headed back to his tent, taking a moment to appreciate the new, fresh air of change that had descended upon the camp.

Someone did stop him just as he pulled the first flap open, however.

"He's gone for good, isn't he?"

The hunter faced the newcomer, momentarily worried that he had overheard too much. He chose his next words carefully. "He is."

Dream nodded solemnly. "I did find it strange that he stayed so long."

Purpled did too, although everything he wanted to say was ready to roll off his tongue at a moment's notice. Every syllable was treasonous, and so all he did was agree with a silent nod.

Dream watched him for a moment longer, trying to read him, to decipher his mind and the lies it hid. He gave up after a minute or two, and instead smiled.

A soft, tired smile.

Not a grin, *the* grin, *his* grin.

"Make the most of the night, Purpled," he said to the hunter. "Tomorrow's going to be hell on earth."

He walked off soon after, alone and deep in thought. Always alone, so small against the sheer number of packed tents and the ancient constellations far above them. Always thinking deeply, as far gone as a drowning man chained to the bottom of the darkest ocean. Alone wolf, feared and hated.

A walking tragedy.

Chapter Seventy-Eight: The Charge

A breaking dawn was always the sign of a new day, new beginnings. It was a sign of change.

At least, it usually was.

Not for Quackity.

Quackity never changed, with the rising sun or with pleas from his concerned peers. He couldn't remember the last time he had – it was likely such a long time ago now.

Some people said he had. "You've changed, Quackity!" old friends cried to his face, right before they left his side for good.

They were wrong, of course. He himself hadn't changed, but his priorities had.

Las Nevadas had always been such a brilliant place. Its white buildings shone like the mountaintops and gleamed in the sunlight like pearly palaces. Even the snow that fell from the few, sparse crowds and piled up onto the occasional sand dune were beautiful and shimmering. Its entertainment was top-notch. It generated a steady stream of income, so much so that Quackity was certain he'd actually gotten his hands on more than half of the SMP nations' full fortune.

Quackity was even proud enough to call it the most magnificent nation of them all. After all, how could any of the others compare to Las Nevadas in any way, shape or form? There was a reason that crowds from everywhere else in the SMP flocked to get a taste of it all.

It was so powerful and influential, until it wasn't.

Today, the streets were silent. The shops, restaurants, theaters and the Casino itself were closed, the shabby signs on the door excusing it all away as simple maintenance to souls that were not even there to see them.

Even the guards had abandoned their posts, their old loyalties to old nations reaching into their moral code and urging them to join the ranks once more.

Quackity had let them go. He didn't have the heart to refuse them.

Now Las Nevadas, the light of the land, was deserted. Big Q was the only one left, looking out across his glitzy land of a thousand, flashing suns from his penthouse apartment at the very top of the Needle, dressed in nothing but crumpled clothes and downing a sour morning cocktail.

Without the crowds, Las Nevadas seemed big, too big for him to govern alone. Even from this height, it was a project of gargantuan proportions, one that he was perhaps not fit to rule.

He was alone, completely and utterly alone.

Almost completely alone.

"Quackity from Las Nevadas?"

Quackity turned around just as Charlie set a foot out onto the balcony. "What is it? I didn't ask for a refill yet."

Quackity had known that Charlie was not human from the moment he saw him. The unstable movements, the green hue to his skin, and the squishy, jelly-like texture of his body, not to mention his unnatural manner of speaking. Charlie wasn't human, although he most definitely tried to be in the strangest ways. Quackity didn't mind. He simply played along with the slime's bad acting and gave him a job. Over time, they even became something akin to friends. In fact, he largely preferred his company to many others.

Charlie wobbled forward, still balancing his trusty round tray on his hand. "You look sad," he pointed out.

"Oh yeah?" Big Q scoffed and took another sip of his cocktail.

"Humans of flesh and bone like you and me are sometimes sad," Charlie continued. "Being sad is not poggers."

Quackity chuckled at his use of the term. He hadn't heard that kind of innocence in ages.

"Well y'know what? Sometimes it clears the mind and lets it all just... rush out." He looked back out across Las Nevadas. "It leaves you empty, and that feels good now and then."

As empty as the Strip.

Charlie came to join him and leaned his wobbling body against the glass railing – Quackity was half-expecting him to slip and slide over the edge. "It is very quiet in Las Nevadas today, Quackity from Las Nevadas."

"It is indeed..." he muttered, drawing his eyes away from the desert.

He watched instead as his glass caught the light, scratching the stubble on his chin that he hadn't bothered to shave off that morning.

He looked at the man who stared back at him from the drink. Unshaven, unkempt, and fully ruined by a large, jagged scar that had almost torn his face apart when dealt.

If it wasn't for the prominent injury and the absence of sheep attributes, he would have been the spitting image of Schlatt – and that was something he couldn't bear no matter what.

"Why is it so quiet, Quackity of Las Nevadas?"

"Everyone has gone off to fight."

"Fight? Why are they fighting?"

"There's a war going on somewhere in the West. Everyone in the SMP went. The other nations are as silent as ours."

"And why are you not fighting, Quackity of Las Nevadas?"

That was a question Big Q had mulled over for ages. Why hadn't he accepted Eret's invite to the war council? Why hadn't he helped in any way? Why had he locked himself in the Needle, all alone with nothing but his slimy butler? Why wasn't he *fighting*?

It was a hard question, with an even harder answer. He didn't have one, and any potential ones made no sense. They intersected, crisscrossed and tangled together like

stitches in the messy underside of an embroidery. He had a sizable mess of explanations but from his perspective, he couldn't see the bigger picture they could form, the bigger reason.

But maybe someone as curious and unbothered by life as Charlie was could.

"To cut a long story short, I've done a lot of bad things," he said aloud. "I've hurt people, people that are now heroes and that are better than I could ever be. I can't bear to face them again. They'll never want to see me again, and they'll never trust me either."

"So you are sad because you cannot fight alongside enemies?"

"No, no, they're not enemies," Big Q corrected quickly. "We just sometimes didn't get along well."

"Oh." Charlie drummed his sticky fingers on the edge of the glass balcony. "Do you have friends, Quackity of Las Nevadas?"

"Of course!" He forced himself to laugh. "I have you, for example—"

"But do you have friends fighting in that big scary war?"

Quackity fiddled with his cocktail glass, spinning the little olive and toothpick around the rim. "Well, I still consider them my friends, yes. But I don't know what they think of me anymore."

"You are a kind person, Quackity of Las Nevadas."

He smiled. "I'm afraid that's not what everyone else says."

"You are kind, but you are sad, and when you are sad, you get angry," Charlie said. "That is alright. I once said "fuck" when I was angry against a glass that decided to drop. It is a very normal thing for us humans of flesh and bone."

"I'm afraid it was all in a lot more than just anger—"

"But everything was okay," Charlie continued to ramble, visibly and happily oblivious to Quackity's comment. "I got angry at the glass, but then remembered that I loved it and I needed it. So I forgave the glass for deciding to fall, and now we are friends. We all make mistakes."

We all make mistakes.

But sometimes, those mistakes were big ones that changed the course of history for the worst, or that left him with large scars that were never going to disappear. Sometimes, those mistakes even broke him away from the only two people he had ever truly loved.

"I think your friends need you, Quackity of Las Nevadas," Charlie said quietly.

Quackity didn't say anything.

"I think they love you too."

That could be nothing but a lie. Charlie meant well, but the innocent lies he spouted hurt. They hurt him enough to change his mind.

Perhaps they didn't love him, but he still loved them. It was a love that he had tried to drown in alcohol, gambling and a glitzy, superficial kingdom of bright lights and sparkling gold, one that had always risen above all that no matter what. It was an affection that tore him apart day and night with no reprieve. It was an adoration that he tried to conceal behind his crooked yet charismatic smile.

It was one that would live forever, no matter what, and he was going to honour it.

Charlie was right.

Quackity downed the rest of his drink in one fell swoop and thrust the glass into Charlie's waiting hand. He waved his butler back and raised his shirt over his head. Then, he began to unwind the bandages.

They were wrapped and tied tightly around his torso, stiff and frayed from age and leaving painfully red marks and sores all over his skin. He let his chest heave as it should, no longer obstructed. It was a blessing to finally breathe again.

And finally, he stretched out his wings to their full glory.

After being released from their restraints years later, they were slightly worse for wear. Some of the feathers were a little ruffled or bent and the bones ached, but once they caught the rising light, they shone with a fiery golden sheen that outshone the sun itself.

Big Q heard Charlie gasp behind him, and he looked around with an amused little smirk.

"My parents called me Quackity for a reason," he chuckled, then beat his wings.

They were certainly not as monumental and fear-inducing as Philza's, but their smaller size and pointed arrow-like ends used to make him fly at the pace of peregrine falcons. He remembered racing them, back in the olden days when he was carefree and purposely careless. Speed was key today, and that was all that mattered.

"Are my weapons still in the chest?"

"Yes, Quackity from Las Nevadas."

"Bring them to me," he ordered. He picked up his shirt and tore two holes in the back.

A breaking dawn was always the sign of a new day, new beginnings. It was a sign of change.

And this time, Quackity changed along with it.

Philza had been the first to rise when the sun came up. He did so in a surprisingly mellow mood, even though the sky was a grim silver.

He allowed himself to take a brisk morning walk when the camp was still silent. The fires and torches had burned out, leaving a heavy veil of smoke hanging over his head and mixing with the morning mist.

That was when he saw the shadow. It disappeared behind one of the tents like a gust of wind, fluttering the canvas and bending the grass.

He tried to follow it, but it had vanished by the time he turned the corner.

Then, he saw it again, when the whole camp had woken up. Sam was busy checking over his wing braces, sewing up the few tears in the sails and tightening some loose bolts. Phil saw it out of the corner of his eye, spiraling around his feet and disappearing soon after.

"Did you see that?" he asked Sam.

"See what?"

"That shadow."

Phil felt Sam stretch one of his wings to check the joint, and take the opportunity to glance in the direction he was looking. "No, I didn't," he apologized, and that was the first and last time the avian mentioned it aloud.

He saw it one last time before the battle began.

A dark, ever changing shadow. It weaved in-between the jagged rocks making up the slopes of the mountains, constantly growing and shrinking with the sunlight.

It looked so... familiar.

Philza watched it in its bizarrely beautiful ballet as it slipped around the edge of the curved battlefield, the black no longer resembling an eerie shadow, but rather a soft, featherlight veil.

Could it be...?

As he followed it, his eyes were dragged downwards, at the small congregation gathered a little ahead of their army. He stretched his wings to dive down to join them, when some frantic flapping alerted him to the skies.

"Philza!"

The newcomer crash-landed beside the avian on the rocks, golden wings twisted underneath him.

"Quackity?!" Philza couldn't believe his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Quackity scrambled up to his full height and tried to regain some of his fallen dignity. He readjusted his sword and pruned a couple of his yellow feathers, sparing a glance for a particularly nasty bruise on his arm before turning back to him.

"I'm here to help," he replied with a huff.

"Oh, so *now* you decide to show up?" Phil crossed his arms and gave him a long, hard stare.

"Philza, buddy, listen. I've made tons of mistakes and I don't expect you to forgive me. But right now I'd just like to point out that I haven't flown in a while, my arm is killing me, I'm probably hungover and I still decided to join y'all. Just let me in. I'll do whatever you need me to."

Philza gave him a once over. He had a lot of things he would have liked to say or accuse Big Q of, but dire times required dire solutions. Numbers mattered more than ever. He gave him a nod and pointed to the rows of avians perched on the ledges a few feet below them.

"Get in line and wait for my command," he ordered.

Quackity's unblinded eye brightened and he quickly obeyed with a soft "thank you" thrown in for good measure.

Once their new recruit had settled in a spot, Phil once more stretched his wings and finally flew down to join the leaders.

"The canons are in position," Fundy said with a little salute.

"As are Snowchester's troops," agreed Tubbo.

"And the Badlands'," added Sam.

"And Kinoko's," Sapnap concluded.

"Good, that's good..." Eret acknowledged in a small voice.

Sam watched him carefully, at the way the king slumped forward on his steed and fiddled with the reins. Even the jewel encrusted armour he wore and weapons he bore could not hide the hurricane of anxiety in his pale eyes.

In fact, none of the strength and splendor of any of his peers could be concealed. Even Technoblade seemed on edge, fidgeting astride Carl's back and staying awfully quiet.

A dark figure glided over them before landing gracefully at their horses' hooves.

"The avians are in place too," said Philza with a little salute. "We're just waiting for the order."

"The charge..."

Eret once again sounded so distant, too distant and overwhelmed to be solicited for everything. He had already done so much for this very battle, with scarcely a moment to himself to properly mentally prepare himself, and everyone knew that.

Instead, Sam guided his horse forwards and took the lead. "Right—" As the leaders all turned to him, he faltered. "Right..."

He didn't know what to say, what to do. He couldn't give them false words of comfort or lie to them about a victory that might never come. He couldn't talk to them honestly either – the truth was one that would hurt them all regardless, and that was the last thing they needed in the circumstances.

He couldn't let any emotion slip, and thus, he once more allowed his mind to lock his sentiments away. For a moment, just a moment, he let the Warden take control of him again.

"Right," he said with a lot more confidence and hardness to his tone, "the soldiers are ready."

"As are the animals," Tubbo agreed, petting Eret's horse's flank.

"And the cannons," Fundy repeated.

Sam sharply nodded at them each in turn. "That's better than nothing. Techno, what about you? Who are you fighting for?"

The piglin raised his head. "I'm fighting for everyone," he grunted.

No army, no faction. Simply the people as a whole. Sam expected nothing less of him.

"Sapnap, where's Karl?"

"Back in the camp," the fireborn replied without hesitation. "I left George with him."

Part of Sam's tenseness relaxed. "Alright, I'm glad."

"I am forever grateful that you all agreed with keeping him out of the fight," Sapnap thanked them all, giving them a respectful bow. "He wouldn't be able to defend himself so soon after losing his sight."

Sam just hoped that Sapnap would soon reunite with his fiancé in one piece. They had a life together that they needed to build, and a final death from either of them would most likely tear Kinoko apart, and everyone else too.

"Today is going to be difficult," Sam admitted to them all, "but we'll get through it one way or another, and our armies need to understand that. They mustn't flee—"

"They can't," someone interrupted him. "The whole place is closed off by fucking mountains. That's why that green prick chose it, probably."

Another fighter on foot joined their little gathering, clad in a uniform of dark navy blue and shining with brass buttons. Some of the seams on the overcoat and shirt underneath were a little crooked from amateurish handiwork, and the boots and tricorn looked like they had definitely seen better days. There was not a single piece of metal armour in sight, but the boy who wore the attire was looking by far the most battle worthy out of them all.

Tommy held his head high and aggressively planted the pole of the flag he carried into the earth. The bright red, white, blue, black and yellow stripes, crosses and curves fluttered in the wind, bringing with them the hints of a tragedy they had all thought had been burned to the ground for good.

"Today's the day we finally kick Dream's ass for good," Tommy said when faced with their questioning stares. "L'Manberg deserves to be here to witness that."

For a moment, Sam didn't see Tommy as a kid – he saw him as a man. And that hurt him a little, enough to crack his Warden's facade.

Children didn't and shouldn't die in battle, but grown warriors did so frequently. Now Tommy was one of them, he was in more danger than ever before.

"L'Manberg doesn't have a full army anymore," Tommy continued, "but I'm still here, and L'Manberg will die with me, its last remaining general."

He looked across at Tubbo and Fundy, who smiled and gave him nods of approval. Sam wondered silently if they had been in on the entire thing.

He didn't have time to fully linger or ask for an answer, as a dark ocean began to rise over the crest of one of the hilly dips of the valley.

Everything snapped within him at once. "It's happening."

His peers all began to come to their senses – including, thankfully, King Eret of the Greater SMP.

"Alright," he said, addressing them all. "We don't have much time. Remember what we all discussed. You have to get everyone to fight, no matter what. Everything has built up

to this moment, and we can't lose it over fear and cowardice. This is it, and we can't go back."

We can't go back, and we were never going to, Sam realized.

"Before we go into this, we need to remind our armies why we're here. This is going to be particularly hard for everyone who's lost someone, because that someone is now fighting for the enemy." Eret pointed to the rising tide on the opposite side of the field, growing larger and more daunting by the second. "That army is made up of ancestors, children, siblings, parents and friends that all perished. They're not evil, just completely misled by the villains who call themselves their leaders and act like their saviours. For that reason and that reason alone, we try to injure only. We're not here to turn this into a massacre. The only ones we target and kill are those in charge: Dream, Wilbur, and anyone else who has the misfortune to be associated with their leadership. Do I make myself clear?"

King Eret was not the governing force of the whole SMP but even so, all the other leaders listened and dutifully agreed with him. Even Technoblade and Philza, the no-man's-warriors, nodded along with solemn gazes.

Eret sighed deeply. "In that case, good luck to you all. We'll see each other again on the other side."

What that was exactly wasn't clear. There were only two possible outcomes that Sam knew of.

Either the other side of the war, when they won. Or rather, more likely, when they were all dead.

Whichever one came first.

"Dream, that army is made up of descendants, children, siblings, parents and friends that lived on. What do we do?"

Purpled knew he sounded weak and pathetic, but it was his one last ditch attempt to reason with the Nightmare.

They were standing on a small, rocky promontory, overlooking the field and the opposing army. Purpled had never expected to see the battleground look so used, with

dips and occasional crevices that could have been nothing but scars made by a previous battle.

"Kill them all," Dream replied with a snarl, and pulled his mask down over his face.

Purpled bit his tongue and stopped himself from saying any more.

Kill them all.

There really was no hope for a better outcome, making his mission more important than ever.

He glanced behind him. In the vast, sickening sea of bloodthirsty fighters, he could pick out a few of his rebels. Their expressions were far more agitated and anxious, and that reassured the hunter a little.

At least some fighters – incidentally, all of his fighters – were still sane.

The others would go absolutely berserk. If he didn't succeed, the battle would draw enough blood to fill the bowl-like valley to the brim.

"All of them?" Wilbur questioned.

Purpled turned back, and found him focused on a figure in the distance with large black wings. It swooped up to join a few rows of avian warriors perched on the mountainside.

"Every single one," Dream replied, with a tone that chilled the hunter right down to his core.

Sam couldn't even hear himself speak, or rather yell. The words came out, his throat ached from the effort, but his voice was audible to everyone's ears except to his own.

Even his mind had gone blank. He didn't even know what he was saying.

He must have been yelling what Eret had told them all to say, however, as all the leaders down their line seemed to be doing the same thing. Their far away silhouettes paced back and forth in front of their soldiers, and their muffled screams were only matched by the unanimous roar of their nations' armies.

The Badlands, along with the few fighters from the Temple, soon joined them with a joyous uproar. It was far too upbeat and enthusiastic for the circumstances. The battle hadn't even started yet, and Sam could already feel a wound open from their misplaced hope.

"Antfrost, you're up," he said, clearing his sore throat. He didn't know what he wanted his friend to do, just something to lighten the burden.

Sam turned his steed so his back was to his troops and took his place at the very front. He heard another pair of hooves come to join him.

"Are you alright?" Puffy asked him.

He swallowed hard and nodded quickly. "I'm fine."

His stomach was churning and he could feel his golden armour stick to his body. He wasn't "fine", not in the slightest, but he didn't want to put stress on anyone else. Especially not on his partner.

Even so, her leg knocked against his shin and made him look at her. The captain reached out and placed a hand on his own. Both of their fingers were covered by gauntlets, and the touch was barely even felt.

Sam almost didn't dare cross her gaze. If he was going to die, he didn't want the last memory of Puffy to be her geared up in a suit of silver armour and ready for a violent, bloody battle.

He wanted the last thoughts of her to be the ones that made him happy. Their first meeting, when Sam had saved her from the ocean; the moment Puffy bravely leapt headfirst into danger to save Michelle in the Nether; her breaking into the Vault to save him; the free fall from the top of the mountain; their waltz at the Red Banquet; their first kiss, underneath the frozen stars, snowflakes and windmill sails; the small, seemingly meaningless moments of domestic bliss from recent months; and the previous night they had shared in the camp, making soft love in the warm golden glow of the candles.

Anything but the image that faced him now. Anything that pertained to war. Even so, she was the only one who could keep him grounded, and he loved her.

"I'm not okay," he admitted to her, lowering his voice to avoid being heard by his soldiers. Morale was fragile enough already.

"It's alright not to be."

"I have to stay strong, I can't let this get to me. I can't..."

"For your sake or for your people?"

He fiddled with the reins, looping them securely around his wrists. "Both."

He wasn't a coward, but he wished he was sometimes. He wished he had that drive to run and flee, and not a strong sense of moral duty that made him as loyal as he was. It was an awful thought and he knew that, and he didn't really wish for that to happen, but *gods* it would have made everything so much easier in the long run. He had to admit that he didn't exactly have a selfish sense of self-preservation, as his own history had shown multiple times.

He tried to gear his mind back into the present moment, to the war they were caught up in, to no avail. Even the sheer magnitude of the army just simply didn't seem real.

He looked down the long, long line. All the leaders were at the heads of their own people, and all of them were facing forward, patiently waiting for the sign.

Kinoko Kingdom and the Badlands were at the far, opposite ends. The Greater SMP and Snowchester were packed up next to them. The sole representative of L'Manberg, Tommy, had vainly taken a proud stance right in the middle, and Techno, Ranboo and Nikki made up their own little pack off to the side. The avians, led by Philza, stared down from their precarious perches on the mountainside. Just below them, on an elevated plateau, the redstone artillery was standing to attention. Fundy was darting between them all, double checking the aims and ammunition, as well as tucking away and readjusting any sensitive exposed wiring or inside machinery.

About half of the fighters were saddled up on loyal steeds, and the others were on foot. At the end of the day, they were all just as scared as each other.

Sam watched them all for a long, long while, analyzing the faces of his friends that he only hoped that he'd be able to see again once everything was said and done.

He was no oracle, but he knew that there was a slim chance that they'd all make it out. They'd all make it to the other side, but which one was the question.

Very few helmets graced the army. The troops favoured shining headpieces that simultaneously showed their communal strength, wealth and staggering fear.

Some wore crowns, such as Sam himself.

While those headpieces were often associated with kings and leaders, popular legends also gave them a much deeper, magical meaning, which pushed many warriors to have one in battle instead of a helmet.

Sam was not an overly superstitious man by any means, but anything he could do to better his outcome and that of others, he'd do without question.

It was a shred of belief in ancient mythology that he was certain he shared with Technoblade, the devout anarchist, who wore a hefty golden crown encrusted with chunky, colourful gems. The piglin was also mirrored by his protégé, Ranboo, who was nervously making sure that his own was on right.

Others chose headpieces with a lot more brutal and violent intent. Horns, spikes, visors resembling a monster's jaws.

Puffy was one of those warriors, bearing a shining silver pair of ram horns where she had none.

And others had decided to go in with their heads bare, shaken by the realization that no helmet or ritual crown could ever protect them from a destined end.

No matter what they chose to or to not wear, every single bit of armour had been chosen out of dread and the threat of an impending doom.

A final attempt to harness ancient powers was some of the only kind of hope that many were relying on.

"I love you, Sam," Puffy suddenly blurted out, making him look back at her. "I feel like I never say it enough, but I love you."

Perhaps they both never said it enough as they would have liked to, but they had shown it in countless different ways for ages. Perhaps that was even more powerful.

But hearing her voice, with a tone that didn't match her hardened battle wear, was a crumb of happiness – maybe even the only one to come out of the entire day.

"I love you too," Sam murmured back.

Suddenly, a horn sounded out from across the field, and everyone's attention shifted.

Sam had always been startled by the absence of a clear beginning in most battles. Not a call, a grace period, nothing. The ones he had taken part in usually had him rushing in head on as soon as he set foot on the terrain.

That was usually how wars were raged in the SMP: brutally and suddenly.

That single horn had changed things drastically, further adding to the sinking feeling that today would be different.

The low, brooding hum of the enemy was matched by another, echoing from the SMP's own army this time. One sideways glance told Sam it came from Technoblade, with his head thrown back and his snout pressed against a horn. He was joined by another booming call from Philza above them. The three of them chimed together and filled the valley with their braying.

The birds from the few, sparse wooded clusters escaped from their roosts with frightened screeches, followed closely by Philza's own murder of loyal crows who deserted the battleground.

The noise made Sam's hairs stand up on edge and once they had silenced, he could still feel their power vibrate through his whole body.

He guided his horse back to the front line, taking his place next to Antfrost. Puffy maneuvered to his side, until the ruling powers of the Badlands and their partners were gathered together one last time.

"This is it," Sam sighed, raising his voice. He looked at them each in turn.

Antfrost's gaze was lost in the distance, anxiously staring at the moving mass of enemy soldiers, the ocean of hate and revenge about to crash down on their heads. "This is it," he echoed.

Velvet nervously ran his tongue over his dry, cracked lips and nodded silently.

Skeppy also didn't say a word, not that he did say much nowadays. Sam was surprised he had even wanted to fight at all.

Sam looked at the final member of their group. Puffy gave him nothing but a smile.

The horns hummed their solemn song once again, and the armies began to move forwards.

"To the end," she whispered, drawing her sword.

He pulled his trident out from the harness on his back and glanced once more at her. One last glimpse of her eyes was all he needed to remind himself how much he had to lose.

"To the end," he murmured back.

With those final words, his heavy heart full, Sam spurred his horse into a gallop.

There were cries, and then silence as the world slowed.

The ground rumbled with the thundering of hooves and armoured feet. The air grew heavy with the gliding presence of the avians and the adrenaline starting to build through every single warrior's body.

Every sound was muffled to one's ears. For a brief moment, they were suspended between the veil of dreams and their violent reality. The charge became a sudden limbo, a sweet moment of reprieve, of reflection.

Soft hisses cut through the air as weapons were drawn. Armour and shields clattered against one another and the ground. The flags tied to the ends of spears and draped across saddles undulated in the wind like a rainbow, the only rainbow of peace for miles and miles around.

The Greater SMP, the Badlands, Kinoko Kingdom, Snowchester, L'Manberg and the anarchists, united as one for the first and possibly last time in their short history.

Even their advancing enemy, an army of undead fighters, had managed to band together in a way that at first had seemed impossible to do.

Both armies had surged forwards at the same time, two opposing forces with the same destructive power.

They had valliant and legendary warriors, skills, numbers, weapons, armour, courage, and seemed so similar at first glance. Almost indistinguishable from one another.

It was only their motives that differed greatly, and those same motives had the power to make and break their world as they knew it.

It could be anyone's battle and subsequent victory, but Fate had decided to roll the dice this time.

There was no way to know the outcome before it came about.

Both sides had never felt more powerless.

Eret put down his visor, and whispered one last prayer.

Fundy lowered his hand, and the redstone engineers lit the cannons.

Sapnap set himself ablaze and summoned his first fireball.

Philza spread his wings, and stroked the horn by his side one last time.

Technoblade did the same, just before he fully lost himself to the bloodthirsty clamour of the voices.

Blood for the Blood God.

Nikki spared a thought for the wildflowers that were being trampled under their feet.

Antfrost looked one last time at Velvet, and Velvet one last time at him.

Tubbo lowered his head and readied his horns, bracing himself for the imminent impact.

Tommy cocked one of his pistols and pointed it forward, practically leaping over the knolls and uneven bumps in the terrain with boyish agility. The flag of L'Manberg fluttered by his side, as he promised it would until his last breath. He let out an ear-piercing war cry that rivaled all the others.

Ranboo allowed himself one more happy thought of warm, candlelit cabins in the tundra with Tubbo and their son. He wondered if he'd ever get to see the snow again.

The dreamy chime of Puffy's beloved ocean waves filled her ears, crashing to the tempo of her horse's gallop.

Sam held his breath.

The crash was deafening.

As quickly as the in-between had settled in, it was broken up by two worlds colliding.

The first blades clashed; the first horse was shot down; the first cannon was fired; the first drops of blood were spilt and the first body tumbled to the ground.

Eret's steed reared and stomped its hooves down on top of a few unlucky souls.

The combination of the redstone artillery and Sapnap's fire bombs sent shockwaves through the ground, tearing up and scorching the grass. Their combined work was decidedly deadly, unfortunately for both sides that found their battlefield soon cloaked by chest-high flames and shards of shrapnel that burst and exploded at every turn.

Philza and his fellow avians dove down and attacked viciously from the air with blaring screeches, or collided with other avians and tore each other apart in mid-air.

Technoblade took out five victims alone with a single careless swing of his battleaxe.

Nikki's rapier found its first mark, slicing through a body like a knife through butter.

Velvet was quickly locked in his first real duel, and was forced backwards. Antfrost immediately pounced off his horse and onto his husband's attacker, claws out and raking across everything they touched. His abandoned steed continued to run wild, trampling a couple of the fighters before being shot down by a rogue arrow.

Tubbo rammed straight into the stomach of a warrior so much bigger than him with a loud and furious bleat.

Tommy's first bullet hit a waterborn with pinpoint accuracy, right between their eyes.

Ranboo's horse was cut down beneath him and he rushed to scramble to his feet.

Puffy's first cutlass swing sliced across an enemy piglin's beefy forearm, angering him enough to pursue her as she rode past.

Sam continued his straight route with a brutal pace. He charged head-on into the heart of Dream's undead army, trident already soaked with blood and steed thundering steadily beneath him.

Everyone's gazes were constantly moving and searching the bloodbath.

The SMP, for the leaders they had to take down.

The Undead, for anything living they could stick their weapons into.

Siblings fought siblings, children fought parents, ancestors fought descendants, and it wasn't long before entire family trees were lying in pools of blood, dead or trying to nurse back a lost, leaking life.

High above, the gods watched on and draped the battlefield with a crimson veil of mourning. They could do nothing else.

The SMP's fate had and always would be out of their hands. No divine intervention, no matter how powerful, could sway their history.

After all, these were men who would fight gods without a second thought rather than tremble at their almighty powers. They'd sooner challenge the heavens than take part in holy rituals to please and soothe them.

Oh sure, they prayed to the divine, yet they didn't truly want their answers. They were some of the strongest, most independent mortals that the gods had ever known.

The gods could do nothing but watch them tear each other to shreds.

One god even prayed a little, deep within the golden walls of his desert temple.

Only one deity was allowed to sweep her dark gown and cloak over the battlefield. She was the only being that no one could keep out, no matter how hard they tried.

Death, once the mere shadow that had danced over the rocks, was now far more real and present than ever.

Bad snapped his head towards the sky.

It was red. The wisps of clouds that crossed it shone pink and the sun was golden, but the sky was as red as a poppy flower, as red as the Egg had been, as red as blood.

A blood sky.

"Bad?" Punz's horse cantered up to his side.

"Red sky in the morning, shepard's warning," Bad recited in a whisper.

"That looks like more than a weather problem."

It was. Bad could feel it deep in his bones and soul, and it was nothing good.

He turned and looked out across the long, winding caravan of people he was busy leading away, far away from everything and everyone.

He had been certain that their stories in the SMP had ended with the fall of the Egg. They were free from its wrath, but not of the one of those they had wronged. Leaving for good seemed to be the only option they could take – it was either that or a gruesome execution.

But a part of Bad still couldn't bring himself to abandon his long-time home. It was the same part of him that made him turn his horse around and speed back the way he came, leaving a trail of confused shouts in his wake.

"Follow me!" he ordered. "Head to the red sky!"

"Bad!" Thundering hooves came to join him, and Ponk's breathy shouts reached his ears. The jostling of his new arm prosthetic, unprofessionally pieced together with a motley array of scraps, clashed and clattered like steel blades. "What are you doing?!"

Bad barely looked back, but he could hear a thundering storm follow him in his wake. "The right thing," he replied, and urged his army onwards.

Chapter Seventy-Nine: Between Heaven And Hell

The SMP was outnumbered, no one could deny that. They had all known that from the beginning, but it hadn't necessarily fazed them as much as perhaps it should have.

After all, strength could materialize in many different ways, not just in the size of one's army.

There was a battle long forgotten in the Old World's history that showed such a phenomenon. Sixty-thousand wild, reckless rebels were defeated easily by only ten-thousand soldiers, simply because the latter were more organized. The Romans also had a few nifty plans up their sleeves. They knew the score.

That particular battle was a prime example that showed that numbers didn't mean everything in war. They weren't the sole key to victory.

However, they *definitely* helped.

Philza saw that when he flew up over the battle for a breather. From high, high up in the skies, the carnage was just as majestic and gut-wrenching.

The valley was a beating heart – alive, too alive. The cannons had been abandoned once the ammunition had run out, despite them having dealt a landslide of damage. The engineers were in the middle of abandoning their posts and joining the hand-to-hand combat, rushing towards the center of the valley. It was the most dangerous place to be, crammed with fighters and loud noise drumming against his temples in time with his short breath. Veins of red trickled out towards the edges. Flags and their poles stood at crooked angles like flimsy trees, stuck and abandoned in the muddy ground torn up by endless stampedes. Bodies were carelessly scattered everywhere, constantly being

trampled into shallow, early graves and becoming more battered and bruised than before. Fire covered every inch of what was left, and didn't seem to be stopping soon.

The clouds were still red, as if someone had tipped a glass of wine over a sky-blue tablecloth. The crimson bled over them all, bathing the battle in a rusty rue that only darkened the bloody streams.

It hadn't been going on for long – not long at all, in fact, but in that short period of time, they had managed to turn the once peaceful valley into a place far worse than the Nether itself.

It was already clear who had the upper hand.

Philza had seen his fair share of wars. Most of the time, he would be fighting alone, side-by-side with men that didn't even bother to learn his name. This battle, as everyone had already noted countless times, was different to the rest.

Part of him couldn't stomach the sight as he scanned the corpses, but he continued anyway. Many were faces that he recognized, but none were of those he loved. That was somewhat of a relief.

The air was heavy with smoke, and he coughed. His palms were rubbed raw, and his wings began to ache.

He had never been through Hell, until now.

In such chaos, however, there was also opportunity.

One of the major plans could finally be put into action. They had thought it up the evening before, when analyzing the map of the field Dream had given them. It was foolproof and would change the tides for good, that they were certain of.

Philza raised up his arm to all the allies who could see him and yelled at the top of his lungs, "*Follow me!*"

He darted towards the jagged tear in the mountain sides and dove down beneath the stones. Immediately, the hellfire cleared and he entered a fresher, brighter place.

The narrow world beyond was almost completely arid. Stones and dusty earth carpeted the ground, and the vegetation was rigid and a dry, murky brown. That said, the air was clean and even the crimson skies hadn't covered it yet. Even the rough stones looked inviting and warm, the perfect place to take a well-deserved nap.

Not today, though. Rest would have to wait.

The ravine had been created years ago by centuries of erosion, and the last sign of moving, animated life was the thin, winding stream that snaked down the middle. Philza followed it in its course, twisting and turning along the water's path. His heart lurched at each corner, tugged incessantly from left to right in a frantic swallow's race.

The walls above him cast long shadows over his body and cut off the silhouette of his wings from time to time. Rocks and sharp ledges broke up the golden glow that the sun cast down but between it all, Philza could just about make up some more winged beings gliding behind him. Avians of all kinds and all species from parrot to dragon followed his lead dutifully, moving as one like a colourful cape across the tight skies of the chasm.

Phil looked back down at the river. Either side of the banks, more soldiers sprinted by, keeping up as much as they could on foot. He swiftly dove down to one of them with hibiscus hair sitting astride an inky black hellhound and hovered beside her for a bit.

"Are they following?" he panted.

He hadn't seen Nikki since the charge and didn't know how much she had suffered since then. From her current state, however, it didn't seem like much: she had only sustained a couple of bruises, scratches on her cheeks and dents to her armour. Her expression was as determined and unwavering as ever.

She briefly glanced behind them to give him an answer. "I'm not sure," she replied, "but I do know that we have brought a good few battalions from our own army with us."

Philza's heart and stomach lurched again, and not just because they had hit another bend in the stream. "We can only hope that this was worth it," he muttered under his breath. "If not, we've left them all to die."

Nikki glanced at him. "We can only hope..."

The avian dove down further and skimmed the stones lining the river's edge. He got to the hellhound's height and caught her attention.

"If the worst comes to the worst," he whispered, "make sure Nikki's safe."

The hellhound observed him from her bright blue eyes that glowed like ice lit up from the inside, and without slowing her pace, nodded. "Will do," she agreed with an exhausted gasp, and urged her body forwards with a determined growl. Her dark fur

rippled with golden hints and revealed a large, painful wound stretching over her shoulder blade.

Philza knew that Nikki would kill him if she found out about his ploy to save her, but he didn't care. She was important to him. The whole Syndicate was, and every other one of his friends too. If the war did end up going the wrong way and Dream's allies took over the SMP, they would be enough to form one hell of a revolution, or even run away and start anew together. He wasn't ashamed to admit that he needed them for better or for worse. Every last one of them, and he was willing to play dirty to keep them out of harm's way.

"Look out!"

He barely had the time to glance up when a dead end appeared seemingly out of nowhere. He veered his course upwards just in time, hands and feet scraping across the rough stone. Below him, other avians joined his ascent while the foot soldiers screeched to a stop and crashed into each other.

The adrenaline of the charge soon turned into confusion as they all gawked up at the wall towering over them.

It was a wall that shouldn't have been there.

"No, no, that's impossible!" Philza cried, thumping his fist against the barrier. It was real, very much real, and made of painfully hard rock. He tried again and again, until his hands started to bleed. "This is supposed to lead to an exit!"

"They lied to us!" Nikki yelled from the ground. "Dream must have modified the map!"

"We've been ambushed!" yelled one of Phil's fellow avians in chilled horror, and the rest of the troops began to panic.

Philza stayed remarkably calm, surprising even himself. He turned his head up to the skies.

Over the edge of the walls, the land was peaceful and quiet. The grass was lush and green, and a small herd of mountain goats grazed idly in patches of vibrant bluebells and soft edelweiss. Philza could see it all. It was nothing like the battlefield.

The avians were close to the top of the chasm, scraping the edges and perching wherever they could, clinging onto sharp hand and footholds for dear life.

Further along the chasm, shadows grew closer, as did heavy footsteps and piercing war cries. Their plan had worked, at least partially, but with no way to loop around anymore, they were doomed.

The avians could fly out of there and leave it all. They could save themselves while the others perished below.

They could, but they didn't.

"We may be trapped," Philza said loudly enough to catch his troops' attention, "but we won't let them cut us down without a fight. Let's give them something harsh to remember us by."

With that, he pushed himself off the barrier and soared ahead of them all. As soon as the first enemy fighter came into view, he yanked them off the ground and threw them in the gushing waters of the stream.

The other avians did the same, and soon the hostile war cries turned into shouts of fear as fighters were picked up and dropped from the skies like nothing but rocks and pebbles. Some merely broke bones, others died.

That had been the cue for the rest of Phil's allies on foot. Nikki led the charge and soon enough, the two sides collided again in decidedly smaller numbers.

Small numbers perhaps, but the opponents that had followed them into the impasse still made up a sizable portion of Dream's army. Even though Phil's own warriors were outnumbered in this situation, he was certain that they could still keep the enemy occupied long enough for the remaining troops on the main battlefield to flip the war on its head.

Anyway, most of the avians had followed him down the ravine, and he saw none in the section of the army opposing them. They had an advantage.

He *thought* they had an advantage.

He was proven wrong when something fast and flaming whizzed a hair's length away from his face.

"*Fire!*" he squawked in alarm. The rest of his winged companions stuttered in their fighting.

It was just long enough for several of them to get hit, their brightly coloured wings turning into masses of charred feathers before their very eyes. The atrocious, sickening scent of cooked meat filled the air and one by one, the air force began to tumble.

Philza wasted no time in ducking and weaving between the fiery missiles and picked off the archers one by one. They were all fireborns from what he could see, and every time he crossed one of their bright gazes, he saw Sappnap.

Even so, he dropped them all in the river, extinguishing every one of their arrows along with their entire bodies. Needless to say, many of them didn't survive and lay in the shallows, bodies black and cracked like obsidian statues, motionless like them forevermore. Again, Phil kept seeing Sappnap in every frozen face, and dreaded being reunited with him in case he found out that he too was killed in a similar, brutal way.

Doused like a house on fire, and left to suffer a forced, lethal cooldown that could have been nothing but agonizing. They would spend their eternity as statuesque lumps of volcanic rock, forever frozen in screams of pain until Time crumbled them away.

Yet still, Philza continued to kill them off one by one.

He could have gone on for longer if a cry from Nikki hadn't alerted him. "Phil! Your wings!"

The avian snapped out of his frenzy. The dark grey smoke hit him across the face, and the flames crackled and spat dangerously close to his ear. Briefly looking back, he gaped at the arrow-sized hole in the canvas of his braces, and watched in horror as it grew bigger and bigger by the second. Ashes drifted away in the breeze, and the tattered fabric fluttered. A gear gave away.

The Angel of Death fell from grace.

He crash landed near the riverbed, on a particularly rough patch of earth that tore at his unprotected body and reopened sores on his hands. His head collided with a boulder, dazing him. A new, deep gnash bled from his temple.

He couldn't hear anything for a while, nothing but an ear-piercing whine screeched through his ears. He was seeing double. The images of the battle were hazy, but what he could just about make out made his heart sink.

We're losing.

Every blade he saw cutting through a body was an enemy's. Every soldier that he saw fall was one of his own. They were outnumbered, and they were losing.

There was only one thing that Philza could do in his somewhat weakened state, one action he could just about wrap his dizzy head around.

He reached his hand around his waist and fumbled with a buckle until it gave away. He pressed his lips to the horn.

And he blew.

Once upon a time, Technoblade had thought that his fighting days were over. Following the Red Banquet and his pardon, he had begun to settle into a peaceful life.

He didn't remember much of his life before being branded as a traitor, an outlaw, a Blood God. He had to have been someone with a normal, happy life at some point. He had to be. He didn't know where it had all gone wrong.

He had reeked of death since he was a child, but now he was growing old. He couldn't deny that. His bones were happy for the rest in those fleeting, peaceful months of reprieve from violence in the SMP. Even the voices hadn't bothered him as much as they used to.

Once upon a time, he thought that he could live a happy life with something close to a loving family.

He was proven wrong when he cut off his first head that day.

The chaos, the violence, the blood. It brought everything back to him. When they came back, bearing their long, heavy cloaks, they tapped into his mind, and when they tapped into his mind, they disturbed the voices. They screeched hymns to Techno's former glory days.

Blood for the Blood God!

Blood, blood, blood!

One of us! One of us!

And it was game over from then on.

Once they began to taint his memories with his history of violence, Technoblade was practically powerless. To them, at least. His body, on the other hand, grew only stronger, and his attacks deadlier.

If some warriors were raging storms on the battlefield, Techno was a hurricane, an avalanche, a tsunami. He was the most violent of nature's forces combined into one old, tired, fed-up and bloodthirsty piglin.

He cut, diced and slashed. He snapped legs, arms and necks. He yanked, tore and shredded. He trampled, injured and killed without mercy. It was an all-too familiar dance to him, one he had performed time and time again.

Once upon a time, Technoblade thought he could be happy and peaceful. Today, he let his mind slip and his body rage until reason was brushed away.

Everything was a blur.

One moment, Technoblade was charging headfirst into a battalion and impaling a few unlucky souls on his tusks, the rest facing the wrath of his battleaxe.

The next, he was fighting back to back with Captain Puffy, standing their ground against an incoming attack from all sides.

He had slipped off Carl's back sometime back and couldn't see his horse anywhere. He couldn't remember how long he had been fighting on foot, all he knew is that he was just as deadly.

In fact, Techno was so far gone that he hadn't even realized who his new fighting partner was until she ducked under his arm. She pushed her blade through one of the two enemies he was fighting while he dealt with the other. It was enough to break him away from the voices for a fleeting moment.

"You're better at handling swords than Sam, I can tell you that," he remarked, feeling her short self press against his lower back.

He picked up a bow from one of the corpses and loaded an arrow. He pointed it upwards and shot at an enemy avian who squawked and plummeted to the floor like a sack of dead weight. They took down two of their allies in their wake and hindered others in their rush for blood.

Glancing behind him, he saw her smile before she lunged and struck a soldier in the arm. "I'll be sure to taunt him with that compliment," she laughed, turning around fully to face him.

Technoblade's eyes were drawn to the wound running from the side of her neck, over her jaw and halfway up her cheek, likely the work of a messy, uppercut swing. It looked deep and painful, oozing blood. He briefly wondered if he should comment on it, but thought better of it when he realized that her adrenaline would hide its existence for the time being.

Puffy spun around again and sliced another warrior across the stomach, kicking their hunched form away to cross blades with another. Technoblade turned around just in time to block another attack sent his way.

The voices began to chatter and grow again, only to be silenced when a horn rang out from across the valley. Technoblade froze and turned his head to the sky.

He also felt Puffy falter beside him. "What was that?"

"Philza," he breathed, roughly shoving away his opponent to get a good look at their surroundings.

The avian was nowhere to be found. Techno turned to the skies again, to the floor, even to the dead bodies scattered around the field. None of them bore the crow feathers and mechanical braces of his dearest friend. That brought him some comfort, but the resounding horn did not.

He instead turned his attention to the rocky entrance of a ravine impasse along one of the sides of the valley. The sun glowed behind it like a heavenly halo, inviting him through the doors of paradise. He vaguely recalled seeing Phil lead a charge through it, followed by a portion of the enemy army.

Technoblade hadn't seen any of them come out. "He's in danger."

"Go to him, Techno! I'll cover you!"

Puffy's blade was still locked, and the piglin got a good look at her opponent. They were a tough and heavily scarred brute that towered over her and blocked out the sun. She was holding her ground well, hooves tearing up the earth beneath her, but his vastly superior strength was pushing her down little by little. That, combined with the

advancing enemies that grew closer and more threatening by the second, meant that the chance of Puffy getting out safe and alive was slim indeed.

Technoblade yanked the warrior off the captain and threw them away as if they weighed nothing but a handful of grapes.

"No," he replied, giving her a small shove, "you go, I'll cover! Tell Phil I sent you!"

"But—"

Technoblade caught an enderian in a headlock, who began to wriggle and gasp for air. "If you die, I die," he grunted.

If Sam wasn't going to kill him for leaving Puffy to die protecting him, then someone else would, like Tubbo. That, and Techno wouldn't have been able to bear her blood and voice on his conscience.

He had become too attached, once again. His devotion was starting to cause more problems than it actually ended up fixing. He would have to have a stern talking-to with it sometime in the future.

Anyway, Technoblade was a legend. He could get through anything the battle would throw at him. He could take care of himself, and he didn't need someone else to do that in his place and die trying.

Captain Puffy still seemed somewhat reluctant. "Tech—"

"Go, *now!*" he roared.

She jumped in fright and galloped off. A moment later, he saw her rounding up a few allied warriors and leading them towards the glowing gateway to the ravine. As soon as she was out of sight, Techno let go of the practically unconscious fighter in his grasp just in time to fend off two new armed parasites that tried to claw at his back.

He had promised Philza that he'd be there for him no matter what, that he'd protect him until the end of Time. Unfortunately, there were some times he couldn't, for one reason or another.

However, Technoblade had never broken his promise.

For you, Phil, the world.

He would rally the whole world in order to save his friend. Technoblade just sometimes couldn't be part of that army, and Phil had always forgiven him for that.

The piglin was pretty sure that he'd even forgive him right now. He'd make it up to him, he promised himself. They'd share good stories and meals around the fire following the battle, toasting to an easy victory and laughing together.

That was something to look forward to, and was the thought that pushed Technoblade forwards then. Even the voices' drive couldn't compare to it.

It was terrifying how easily the braces tore off his wings. Perhaps he was just desperate enough to rip apart pure metal itself. The simmering ashes of the mechanical wonders smouldered and melted in a corner, burning away the last traces of a remarkable mechanical prototype that had changed his life.

Now it was gone, his life was changed again, at the worst possible time and in the worst possible way.

He had no means of flying anymore. His fuzzy head had cleared up, but that didn't matter. He was confined to the ground once again, and he was easy prey for all who wanted to take a bite.

Every part of Philza's body was caked in grime and sores. He left bright red fingerprints on the pristine ivory surface of the horn, and swollen lips were bruised from being pressed against the mouthpiece an ungodly amount of times. He was sure that the hum would forever bellow in his ears and linger in the back of his mind. He had eventually discarded it to the side when his hands were too raw and painful to press against its rough ornate carvings.

He had called for help. He just hoped that someone would respond. Until then, he had to stand his guard. He was struck down to the ground, but he wasn't defenseless. He had lost his wings, but he hadn't lost years' worth of fighting skills. He had lost his braces, but not his sword.

He drew it from its sheath and staggered up into a rooted stance.

His wings had never felt so much like burdens until now. Since he was fitted with the braces, he had forgotten how totally and utterly naked they were without them, and how much useless weight they bogged him down with.

He didn't have time to mull the loss over, as before long he was locked in his first vicious sword fight of the day. He won it easily, just as he won the next, and the ones after those.

Phil had learned pretty early in his long, long life that knowing how to fight was key to survival and a long life. Of course, victory could largely depend on the military technology provided. There was a reason that it was considered foolish to bring a knife to a gunfight.

But in all the battles he had fought in his eons of existence, from Troy to Verdun, and even L'Manberg to the Red Banquet, there was one weapon that had always proved useful: a sword. He had learned to get quite good at it.

He wasn't as strong as Technoblade. He wasn't as tall as Sam. He wasn't as nimble on his feet as Puffy, Tubbo or Tommy. Nevertheless, he had one major advantage over them all, and that was age. With time came proficient skills, and he used them to their full advantage that day.

He didn't go looking for fights, but dealt with the ones that came looking for him. He also brought much needed backup to any of his struggling soldiers. He was just as lethal on the ground as he had been in the air, although the tables hadn't turned quite yet.

There was still a long way to go before they could even remotely suggest a draw. A long way, and the tunnel towards it was endless.

It became even longer and harder to trudge through when one particular man's sword crossed his own.

"Hello, father," Wilbur greeted with a sneer. "Did you miss me?"

Philza's weapon was thrown clean out of his hands and a knee sharply connected with his chest. He stumbled to the floor and reached for the hilt again. He closed both hands tightly around it and rolled over onto his back.

Wilbur advanced towards him with slow steps. It was as if he was savoring every heavy thump of his boot against the ground, every cloud of dust that it brought up, and the way every step closer sent a chilling vibration through Phil's entire body.

He had never been outright terrified of his own son, but there were a few times he came close. This was one of them.

"Dream was right in giving you that *slightly* edited map, don't you think?" Wilbur asked, calmly raising his blade above his head. "If you hadn't foolishly decided to follow it and fall right into our ambush, then we wouldn't be here together. He did us both a favour."

He brought the blade of his sword down in one fell swoop. Philza rolled out of the way in the nick of time, and the weapon crashed down on empty air and rocks. He scrambled to his feet and regained his bearings. His foot slipped and he almost fell backwards again, this time into the rocky stream.

The waters were running red by this time, and suddenly the ravine was inviting no more.

A mix of blood, sweat and smeared tears stuck his hair against his scalp, which was still throbbing from his crash. Phil knew that he looked a mess, and weaker than he had ever been before. Wilbur on the other hand didn't seem fazed in the slightest. He simply dislodged his blade from between the stones and sauntered towards the avian again.

"We could have a chat," he suggested, still with that eerily relaxed tone that made his blood run cold. "Just you and me, having a proper chat. Imagine that."

"I have nothing to say to you, Will, you know that," Philza spat out between ragged breaths. When Wilbur lunged again, he stepped back and braced himself against the current. "You never listened to anything I had to say to you in moments like this."

"I knew it," Wilbur scoffed, the end of his trenchcoat drenched by the flowing mixture of dirty blood and fresh mountain water. "You fail once and you give up on me. There's no button to press here, no TNT, no nation for me to drown in the turmoil of saving or destroying it. I'm not playing god here. See, the difference between then and now, Phil, is that I actually *want* this chat with you."

Philza definitely *didn't*. He hadn't wallowed in turmoil and regret all these years, hadn't just started to heal a little, to come face to face with his son on the battlefield and have it all come crashing back. In fact, the avian was about to let him know that, when he hesitated as he looked at the man up and down.

Wilbur was wearing no armour. He never did, and Philza found that foolish. Completely and utterly foolish, and unfortunately it was something that Wilbur had picked up from his dad. They were some of the only fighters on the field with no chestplate, leg-guards or helmets, and yet they were the only ones who were purposely dragging out their duel for longer than a minute or two.

"I don't want to kill you again, Wilbur," Phil said with a warning tone, "and I don't want to talk. We have nothing to say to each other anymore."

The threat came out more like what it really was – a heartbroken plea for his son to just leave. Put down his sword and *leave*. That was all Phil wanted for his boy. He wanted him to leave and never see him again, as long as that meant he'd be safe.

Instead, to his chagrin, Wilbur stood his ground. "Oh, that won't be necessary. I'm going to kill you first."

He leapt over onto the bank and sliced at Phil's head. The avian parried his attack and forced him back, pushing them both back onto dry land. The effort to do so was incredible, at least for Phil. He had never imagined his son so strong, so capable in war. If the circumstances had been different, he would have even praised him for it.

Philza missed when Ghostbur – all Wilbur's happiness, childhood and innocence given form. His presence, when they had crossed paths, was one of the only things that had made him start to forgive himself.

Now there was only the ache of vengeance and the fury, but most of all the insanity. It was the insanity and mindless, rash decisions that had made his son cut off his wings. Wilbur was barely anyone but a demon now, summoned back to the living realm to give the world hell.

"I built and led a nation. I fucking beat the worst of the worst in combat. I pioneered a new form of government. I led a successful revolution. I won wars. I wrote books and pamphlets and poems worthy of the finest libraries. I defied Death herself and came back to life. I trained the biggest army the world has ever seen!"

Every item on the long list was matched by brutal swings. Wilbur's blade flashed like lightning. Sometimes, it snagged a bit of Phil's garments. Other times, the tip touched his skin directly. The attacks were angry and violent and set out to kill him. The avian couldn't do anything but back away and block to the best of his abilities.

"I did all of that, and for what?" Wilbur cried, raising his voice. His cold, calculated calmness melted away, revealing the piercing and rising anger underneath. "I did it so you could be proud of me! I want you to be proud of me for once! *Fucking once!*"

The volcano erupted, and the tempest of fury was fully and finally released from behind its façade.

"Say you're proud of me, father! Say you're proud of all I've achieved!"

Philza didn't utter a single word, still trying desperately to defend himself. Wilbur kept swinging, although his movements became sloppier, less precise. Where once fought a cool and controlled general now thrashed a madman, and one was far more dangerous than the other.

"You can't, can you?" He flew even further into his rage. "I was always second to Tommy and Tubbo, no matter what I did! Huh? Admit it! *Say it!*"

Phil finally found his opportunity. He hit Wilbur's wrist with the pommel of his sword. The madman, startled, dropped his sword, and the avian kicked it away. He held his own blade to his neck, and gazed at him with pitiful eyes.

"Wilbur, you're my son," he said, softly but firmly. "You were always first in my heart, and I was proud of you. I really was."

Wilbur seemed surprised, and for a brief moment, his blazing anger was allowed to smoulder. His brown eyes blue out wide, partially hidden by that ridiculous floppy fringe that he had styled way back during his tamer, rebellious teenage years, against his father's wishes, of course. Philza almost smiled at the memory. He resisted the urge to reach out and fondly stroke his cheek.

Instead, he settled for words. "My smart, talented, beautiful baby boy," he whispered. Such softer words had never been spoken on such a bloody, violent field. "I was proud of you until you threw it all away for nothing."

"Not for nothing, but for reasons you will never understand," Wilbur muttered, the spite in his voice far from the doubt in his eyes. "You never understood me. You were so eager to kill me in L'Manberg just to get me out of your fucking life. Well guess what, Philza? I'm back, and I'm not fucking dying again anytime soon."

"And I don't want you to," the avian assured him. He experimentally lowered his blade. His son didn't move. "I want you to think about this, Wilbur, and make the right choice. You don't have to follow Dream."

And that was when the softness ended. "He was there for me when no one was," Wilbur spat, the venom returning in full force, "and that's worth everything."

He gave Philza a good, hard kick in the stomach then picked up his sword. The avian barely had the time to get to his feet before he had to parry his son's blade once again.

"You wouldn't understand since all you care about now is anarchy, but a leader's job is to put his people first," Wilbur growled. "L'Manberg is gone, but I've found new troops to lead. They want victory, and Dream can give them that. I'm staying with him. Why wouldn't I? I mean, look around you, Philza! We're winning! *We're fucking winning!*"

And for the first time since the beginning of their duel, Philza realized with horror that he was right about something. The glimpses he was getting of the rest of the battle were few, but made his stomach churn. Most of the fallen bodies were of his allies, his soldiers. Most of the blood than ran were theirs. Most of the warriors standing were their opponents.

"You're losing, and you know what? Good! The SMP has been corrupted for too long, and Dream was right about everything. It needs a purge, and you leading your army into the jaws of our trap is just the beginning! We should be thanking you!"

"You won't win," Philza said with no conviction in his tone. As his hope ebbed out of him, so did his will to fight on.

"Because you think you will? How so?"

The heavens answered before the avian could even open his mouth.

Philza believed in the gods, but he rarely believed in the concept of divine intervention. He had only seen it so rarely in his long lifetime. But that day, on that narrow battlefield in a rocky impasse, when the rain of arrows fell from the sky Philza was certain he was witnessing a miracle.

The dark, thin projectiles plummeted down from the sky in waves and waves, striking down enemy soldiers where they stood. In a matter of moments, both sides were evened out. The battle stopped for a split second, enough time for all those still standing to raise their gaze from the mortal realm.

One by one, dark silhouettes stepped into their view at the top of the chasm, most of their figures hidden by the sun in their backs. They all held bows and were armed to their teeth, but they were certainly not a part of Phil's own army – he didn't recognize any of them from any of the training sessions he had led. They were clearly from the opposing side, which only made their actions more confusing to explain.

One newcomer cut himself out from the rest. He balanced himself right on the edge of the ravine, and everyone could get a good look at him. A violet saviour.

"We heard someone call," Purpled said, staring straight at Philza down below him.

The avian promised to worship that horn until the day he died.

Wilbur, on the other hand, had turned even more murderous than before. "What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" he hissed, as dangerous and menacing as a cobra.

Purpled didn't even flinch. "Making sure you bastards don't win," he said. He raised his arm above his head. "*Fire!*"

Another hailstorm of arrows rained down upon them, hitting their own people. That was when the tables truly began to turn, and Wilbur's army started playing the defensive game.

"*Traitors!*" Wilbur screamed up to the rebels.

He pushed harder against Phil's weapon until he shoved him back completely. This time, Philza tripped backwards and could not find the footholds to get up.

Wilbur sprinted towards him and readied his final blow. "Your troops may win, but mark my words, it'll be without y—"

Philza blinked in shock. Wilbur froze in his run. And suddenly, he seemed to melt. First, he dropped his sword. Second, his arms. His tight grimace faded away into one of lax surprise, and unseeing eyes looked straight ahead.

Wilbur slowly turned to look around, and Philza almost sobbed aloud. An arrow jutted out from his back, made of light oak wood and tipped with silver.

"That was for everything you've done," Nikki bit out between gritted teeth and teary eyes. Her bow was shaking in her hands, although she was still standing strong.

Even so, the large boulder beneath her feet seemed to shake. She felt sick, and she rushed away without a glance back.

On cue, another arrow – this time of dark ebony and gold – struck Wilbur. It had been shot from high up, and Philza craned his neck back up to the top of the ravine once again.

"And that's for everyone you wronged," Purpled shouted at the top of his lungs and once more drawing attention to himself, staring down with disdain at the villain he had hated so much – he was inclined to say, even more than Dream himself. "You bastard."

Wilbur said nothing. Philza couldn't see his face. He couldn't see his expression, and perhaps he didn't want to.

He didn't want to see his son's eyes filled with hate or watch as his silent lips murmured out a final curse. He didn't want to see any pain and regret either, because Philza knew that would only be more agonizing to watch.

If only Wilbur could have been a blank canvas, left alone, spotless. He wouldn't have been painted with lovely, mellow and bright colours, but that would have meant that it couldn't have been twisted and corrupted either by abstract thoughts and dark, sharp paint strokes.

Watching Wilbur suffer and lose himself to madness was more painful to Philza than watching him die. At least now, there was a chance his son's long, torturous battle with his mind would end. For him, and for all those who had the misfortune of crossing it.

There was finally a light at the end of the tunnel, and a happy ending of sorts to Wilbur Soot's story.

Wilbur stayed standing for a second or two longer, swaying and staggering from foot to foot. Then, he collapsed to the ground. Clouds of dust billowed up over his body like a shroud.

And Philza didn't cry.

He didn't sob over his corpse like he had on November 16th. He didn't have a violent urge to go out and slaughter the world for killing his son. He simply knelt there, a few feet from the body, eyes glued to the arrows jutting out from his trenchcoat and into the sky.

It was a horrible and sudden way to go. Yet still, Philza didn't cry. Instead, he smiled sadly, and stood up.

After war, there was always peace in one form or another.

The air felt fresher, somehow, and the ravine battlefield lighter once again. Arrows still spewed from Purpled's battalion stationed at the top of the ravine. Nikki had rushed away towards other battles.

Philza was given a moment to breathe deeply and take a break. The sun had broken through the gathering red clouds, pouring down onto the ground in pools of shining light.

For the first time in a while, Phil was certain that yes, there was hope left. There was a potential victory out there somewhere near, and they were so close to grasping it themselves.

A general shock had fallen over their opponents. All their eyes were glued to Wilbur's dead body, horrified and shocked beyond words. Some continued to struggle on and continue fighting, some ran, but many simply sank to their knees and hung their head in defeat. Either way, their hesitation was long enough to let Phil's allies get back on their feet, and he was pleasantly surprised to find that losses were fewer than he had originally thought.

Purpled and his allies were now making their way down to join the fighters, bows slung over their shoulders and drawing their swords and hatchets.

He glimpsed Puffy at the head of a small retinue in the distance, and he couldn't hide his relief. He stretched his wings and waved to her. "Puffy!"

She looked around, saw him and waved back. She readied her cutlass and started fighting through the few remaining hostile soldiers to reach him.

"Techno sent me!" she yelled from afar, her words bouncing off the rocky slopes and piled up bodies before reaching his ears.

Phil smiled and rolled his eyes. Classic Technoblade – he was probably too caught up in the bloodlust to do anything rational apart from give out vague orders to whoever was listening.

He opened his mouth to answer her, or to crack a joke at Techno's expense or to thank her for heeding the call.

No sound came out.

His mind was alright, his fears were at bay, and throat was as fine as it could be. He couldn't understand why he was so quiet. He tried again, to no avail. All that escaped him was pure and utter quiet.

Then, he saw the arrow.

It stuck out in the middle of his chest like a sore thumb, like a needle in a pincushion, like a branch on a tree trunk, like—

The pain trickled in soon after, like a red hot poker pushing agonizingly slow into his skin and rummaging around his body. It chased out everything in his chest, and his heart escaped to his ears where it pounded loudly like a drum.

Something else whizzed towards him and knocked the air straight out of his chest. A second arrow joined the first, lodging itself firmly into his flesh.

He didn't scream, he had no air to. He didn't say anything, he had no air to.

The avian slowly raised his head and caught Puffy's gaze once again from across the field. His lips parted slightly in one last attempt to call for help.

Again, no words, no screams, not even a single breath.

Philza's knees scraped the ground beneath him, and his wings collapsed with him.

"No!"

Puffy's strangled scream was muffled, as everything else around him became. The clashing swords, the last few arrows, the clanking of armour and the heavy thunder of feet against the ground – everything was blanketed by a misty haze, similar to that of a peaceful dream.

His chest burned like hellfire.

His hand weakly wrapped around one of the arrows and tried to pull. He had no strength anymore, and his whole body failed him. He felt no more real than the deafened battle raging around him.

That was when Philza saw her.

She rose from a mere wisp of a shadow slithering across the battleground, and materialized right in front of his very eyes.

At first, he thought he was looking at the blurred silhouette of a soldier rushing to his aid, but soon realized that he was wrong.

The apparition was no soldier, but a dark, mystical beauty.

She walked with a slow and even pace. Like a gurgling river, she never stopped or faltered in her course. She didn't shy away from the swinging blades and arrows whizzing merely inches past her face. She brushed past the corpses with no gesture of horror or repulsion. She stepped through thick pools of blood as if they were merely water, and left no footprints behind.

Everything about her was otherworldly. Her body was draped in featherlight silks that danced around her like purple and black flames. Her hands and feet, just barely visible beneath the curling fabric, were as white as bone, and a wide-brimmed hat from which hung a thick veil concealed her face. Tangled locks of ebony black, briar-like hair escaped out from underneath. Pure white sprigs of hemlock and edelweiss were threaded into her tempest of veils, sparkling against the dark colours like stars in the night sky.

Philza could even hear his crows chattering and flapping their wings from somewhere, maybe even from deep within her body and aura. Everything he could feel then seemed to be coming from her, from her draped and mysterious form.

She would have been seen as eerie and chilling to some, but not by the avian. He knew who she was. He could never forget her, and neither could anyone else who had briefly managed to cross her path.

Those who did never got to tell the tale, because their last life was over before they could.

"My Lady," Philza whispered, the rest of the world falling away as she came closer. His eyes were brimming with tears, and he choked down a sob.

"My Angel," the Lady replied with a humoured hum.

He reached his bloodied fingers towards her. His hands skimmed the celestial silk of her robes, billowing in an invisible wind. He tried to grasp her, to bring her closer.

She knelt down to his height and held his hands. Her fingers were the softest thing Phil had ever felt, and thousands of years certainly hadn't changed them. He wanted to

scream, to cry, anything he could do to fill the silence around them and tell everyone how much he loved her.

"You're late," he teased weakly.

Her laugh chimed like the heavy toll of church bells. "I'm never late, my love. I'm always right on time."

The world had stopped, and the sky had turned to a bright, blinding white – a void of nothing except long-overdue peace. Phil could still glimpse the shadowed silhouettes surrounding him, lying still or frozen in their frantic fighting.

Puffy and Nikki were still in their sprints, heading straight his way. Purpled was suspended in the air, caught in mid-throw of an enderpearl and holding his bow aloft with the string pulled back. An enemy archer with a now empty quiver was in the process of stumbling backwards, a newly shot arrow from Purpled firmly planted between her eyes.

Further along the dusty, pebble and corpse-ridden floor of the impasse was Wilbur, or rather his body. Still, motionless forevermore. His blood trickled into the waters and were carried away by the current.

The last living, running and bold part of his son was being taken away. A tear escaped Philza's eye.

"Our son is safe," she whispered, melting his worries away with nothing but a simple sentence. "He's alright now. His body and mind may have become villains, but his soul is certainly not."

"Will I get to see him?" he asked her.

"I don't think you have much of a choice." She laughed a mother's laugh, filled with the feigned exasperation and all the adoration they bequeathed to the wants of their children. "He wants to hug his father again."

Philza choked on his tears, smiling as wide and as brightly as his face would let him. "I'm ready," he murmured, his plea more like a prayer to his numbed, ringing ears. "I've been ready for so long..."

The lavender veil hanging from her wide brimmed hat parted. It let him see the full, beautiful face he had been yearning to glimpse once again for his entire eternity.

How distant that beautiful night with her at the lake seemed now, and the avian marvelled at how far he had come since.

Her dark eyes and gentle smile were everything he had once loved, and everything he had never stopped loving since. He was ready to go home.

"I know you are."

She brought him into her, and he succumbed.

Lady Death's kiss was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted: soft, black pillowed lips of flowers, candle wax and silk resting places. They consumed his entire being, and he began to slip.

The world started to move once again, this time quiet and blurred. Everything drifted away, until nothing truly mattered anymore.

The sleep would be long, eternal even, but he had been ready to fall into its grasp for a while now. His soul had been aching for its enticing, morphine-like drug for hundreds of years. It was here at last, and he welcomed the deep slumber with open arms.

In one last earth-bound breath, Philza finally and happily lost his immortality.

Chapter Eighty: Echo Of Death

Sam had thought that everyone had agreed to listen to King Eret: they all had to aim to injure, but not to kill. That was the deal.

Unfortunately, as with all other courteous manners and fair rules of war, it had been tossed out the window and trampled beneath feet, paws and hooves. Most of the original agreements and morals were now soaking in the mud and puddles of blood along with the rest of the dead.

Sam tried, he really did. He tried to *injure* and not to *kill*, but what else was he supposed to do when the other side didn't do the same? What was he supposed to do when the enemy was out for blood, and his head?

He was empathetic towards all those whose family of the past or present were involved, and with the pain that they were experiencing at having to watch them die as opponents.

However, he couldn't be everyone's hero. He had a family too and in recent times, he had learned to put them first. He couldn't back down and let himself get slaughtered.

He knew that most of his other allies were in the same predicament. There was a lot more death on the field than wounds that could be healed with time and care.

They *had* to kill, no matter how much they hated it.

Skilled footwork, sharp swings and advancing enemies had pushed him and a few other troops into the shadow of the largest rocky peak that towered over the field. The ground was just as bumpy and uneven here as it had been out in the wide open, and stray boulders and sharp rocks embedded into the earth tripped up any and all of the unsuspecting fighters.

Sam had been split up with Puffy, Ant, Velvet and Skeppy a while back, but most of the Badlands stayed by his side. The last sighting he had of any of them was Skeppy's horse getting shot out from underneath him.

Some of Kinoko's troops had also been herded into the jagged shadow, and he found himself fighting alongside Sapnap whose fire had only done more damage since the original flare.

Sam's golden trident, the same one gifted to him by Technoblade, had been soaked in blood from the first minute of the battle, and hadn't been given a moment to dry since. A fitting tribute to the Blood God, some would say.

It made Sam sick to his core. He had taken so many lives, too many for his heart to handle or his brain to comprehend. Even if the survival instinct pumping through his veins kept him stable and alert, there was no telling what kind of imprint the battle would leave behind – if any at all. Maybe Sam wasn't going to make it out at all.

That intrusive thought that kept swaying his mind made him hesitate a second too long, and he was knocked to the floor. He managed to scramble to his knees, but his opponent's axe would come crashing down over his head before he could do anything else.

He couldn't even spare a final thought, and simply braced himself for the impact.

A black horse suddenly galloped in front of him. It reared, crashing back down on the enemy and splitting their skull in two.

At this point in the chaos, Sam had barely seen any more warriors on horseback, and too many steeds were lying dead in the mud to call their cavalry a success. Nevertheless, there were still a couple here and there that swooped in from time to time, and Sam prepared to thank his saviour.

He finally got to his feet, his golden armour weighing heavier than it ever had before. He sheltered his eyes against the sun, getting a good look at the figure. He opened his mouth, and suddenly stopped.

He stared.

"*Bad?!!*" he splattered, scarcely believing his own eyes.

"Sam!" the other cried, visibly delighted to recognize a familiar, friendly face.

Unfortunately, Sam's reaction and expression at that moment were far from friendly.

The man yanked the demon down off his horse and gripped him roughly by his collar. He shook him violently and snarled. "You asshole!" he screamed in his face. "You bastard, you fucking prick! I should tear your throat out and fucking—"

"Language!"

Bad looked absolutely terrified, staring Sam down as if he was staring Death herself in her face. In that show of fear, Sam saw no trace of evil, hostility, vengeance or even the Egg.

He saw nothing in the demon but his dear old friend.

His grip on Bad's collar soon turned into a bone-crushing hug as he pulled him against him.

"Gods, I'm so happy you're back," he sighed.

He almost laughed. Even after all this time and strife, Bad – who was still trembling in unparalleled fear, bless him – still smelled of sweet, freshly-baked muffins.

He felt arms encircle his back as the demon hugged him back. "So am I," he murmured. A wiry tail wrapped around his leg. "I'm sorry."

Sam had never heard him sound so genuinely remorseful. He pulled away with a smile and gave the demon a hearty pat on the back.

"I think we all are," he agreed, leaving him with the unspoken promise to sort out any remaining differences once everything was over. He straightened his crown. "What are you doing here?"

"We saw the sky and figured you were in danger. We decided to come back and make things right."

"We?" Sam reiterated, puzzled.

Bad grinned, nodding. "We," he agreed. The ground started to tremble.

An avalanche began, coursing down the southern rocky borders of the valley, growling and roaring with war cries and pawing steeds. There was no snow in sight, but rather a seemingly endless stream of warriors. As they came closer, everyone could see that many were grossly underprepared, but their sudden and brash arrival had already chilled many to their bones. The newcomers destroyed everything in their path and plowed through the battlefield, joining the SMP's side of the war without so much as a questioning glance.

Sam could recognize a few of them from afar. Punz, for example, who gleamed in a powerful suit of armour like a mythical white knight. He tore through the fighters like lightning. Hannah was there too, and he never knew that she was such a damn good shot with a bow.

Sam had never been so relieved to see the Egg's victims, and thus the Badlands. They had all returned. It seemed that some tears could be repaired.

Hope was just around the corner.

"I don't care what anyone says, I'm pardoning you all on the spot," Sam sighed in relief.

Bad laughed nervously. "I'm guessing that you've handled things well while I've been gone."

"Yeah. I would love to elaborate further—" Sam shoved Bad out of the way and knocked out the enemy soldier that had tried to sneak up on them. "—but we are in the middle of a war. We can leave the politics for later."

"Agreed," nodded Bad, and took out his sword.

Sam hadn't fought alongside Bad in what felt like years. However, their synchronized swings, ducks and lunges begged to differ. It was as if they had never been parted in the first place.

Sam wished that they had never been, in fact. There was a lot that could have been avoided if the Egg simply hadn't come to be.

And *yet*.

If the Egg hadn't existed, then Sam would have forfeited a lot of what he had now, namely things he loved to bits. Many of his friendships, his family, even his love, would simply have never happened. There had been a silver lining after all.

But gods, he was glad to have his friend and his people back, and in the nick of time too.

He was alive, and it seemed that most of the people around him were too. One of them, he was absolutely and utterly thankful for when he came running up to them.

"You look like hell," Tommy laughed, his own face caked in grime and sticky sweat. Bright red cheeks, dry lips and wide eyes smiled, pumped up by energy.

He didn't seem injured, to Sam's relief, and he thanked the gods. The boy's uniform was a little singed here and there, the buttons looking a little more grey than gold, and his tricorne had been lost somewhere on the field. The L'Manberg flag, despite everything, was still with him, tied around his shoulders like a cape. He was also splattered with blood, which unfortunately was not unusual, but it was certainly not his. In fact, he was sporting several severed body parts that were simply *not his*.

Quite literally.

"Tommy!" Sam felt bile build up in his throat, and he gagged. "Put those down *immediately!*"

The boy blinked at him, gone out. Eventually, he dragged his eyes to the scraps human and beast hanging from his belt, worn proudly like trophies. "Leave them?" he spluttered. "Are you crazy?"

"Are *you* crazy?! You can't just collect severed bits of people and parade them around!"

"Why not?!"

"Because it's wrong in so many ways, and especially today! That hand or that head could belong to someone's brother for all you know and you're waving them in front of their faces!"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "But Technoblade does it! I've seen his collection in the tundra, and he's a huge sucker for skulls!"

"Between you and me, Tommy," Sam groaned, exasperated by the boy's attitude, "Techno isn't the best role model. In fact, I'd actively discourage you from copying him in battle in any way shape or form."

"But—"

"Tommy, I'm serious."

"Urgh, *fine*!"

Tommy reluctantly unhooked the body parts and dropped them aside one by one. He did so agonizingly slow and gave the man a grumpy glare after each one.

Sam stifled a smile and a laugh. He quickly cleared his throat and gave the boy a stern, approving nod. "Now, stick with me and watch your back."

"Fine," Tommy whined. He was definitely trying to keep up his pouty act, but ended up being extremely bad at hiding his enthusiasm when he realized that he was going to be fighting alongside Bad and Sapnap – men who Sam knew would seem very cool in his eyes in the heat of battle.

Tommy did stick close to Sam though, just as the latter had instructed him to do, and the two of them were thrown back into the fight. Tommy was nevertheless surprisingly quiet and when Sam occasionally looked around to check on him, he'd find him staring wistfully at the pile of spoils he had been forced to leave behind.

"Listen, if you really want a trophy of some sort," Sam eventually caved in, in the midst of blocking a sword swing. "I'll make you one."

Tommy set off his gun then looked up at him with wide eyes. "You will?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Can you make it big and cool with tons of gold and rubies and shit?"

This time, Sam couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, absolutely. Whatever you want."

"Thanks dad, you're the best."

Sam momentarily turned back to his duel, where he twisted his trident and wrenched the blade out of his opponent's hand. He then struck them in the stomach, the prongs breaking through the chainmail and impaling them clean through.

"Tommy, watch it will you?!" Sapnap yelled, storming over to their side. "That bullet almost hit me!"

"Fuck you, Snapchat! Learn to dodge."

"Child!"

"Prick!"

The fireborn flipped him off with a fiery finger. The boy stuck out his tongue and purposely shot another round close to him.

"Children, stop it," Sam warned. "Now's not the time to turn on each other!"

"He started it!" Tommy argued.

"You see?" Sapnap scoffed. "He runs from everything to go suck up to his dad! He's a kid!"

"Fuck you!"

"Both of you, quiet!" Bad interjected, adding a quick "Language!" warning soon after.

The two "children" were separated, and they resumed their fighting once more. Less and less soldiers were charging that way, and things calmed down. Perhaps they could allow themselves a bit of banter to lighten things up.

"If it's any reassurance," Sam whispered, leaning into Tommy's ear and shooting Sapnap a wry look, knowing full well he was in earshot, "you're a bigger man than Sapnap will ever be."

"Oh, I already knew that," the boy assured him brightly, "but thanks for reminding me."

"You know, I hope you get shot someday," the fireborn growled. "That'll teach you to mock me, little shit."

There was no true bite behind his words. Sapnap was known for a sharp, fiery tongue, but he was also a prankster. He liked to tease. He didn't really mean what he said to Tommy, and everyone knew that. Even the boy himself knew that, or he wouldn't have mimed a rather rude and mocking gesture back.

The point was, it was a *joke*. Nothing but a *joke*.

Which was why they were all shocked to the core when Tommy cried out and almost toppled to the floor, an arrow jutting out of his leg. Immediately, two of the three adults ran to his aid.

Sam was there first and helped Tommy stagger to his feet again, worried beyond belief. Bad was next and started bombarding the boy with frantic questions.

Sapnap on the other hand stood back. Beneath his orange flames, he had turned as white as a sheet. "That wasn't me," he rushed to apologize. "Gods, I swear that wasn't me! I—"

He stopped rambling in fear when Tommy groaned loudly, clutching his thigh.

A few drops of blood had already started to leak from the entrance wound, and his flesh under his trouser legs made a disgustingly slick and squishy sound when he grasped it.

"Where the fuck did that come from?" he muttered, hissing through the pain.

Sam knew the second he looked around them.

There, partway up on the jagged path of the mountain, stood the villain of the hour. He would have almost blended into the green flora of the rocky walls if it wasn't for his mask, ever-smiling and a startling white. He clutched a bow in his hand that he swiftly hooked over his shoulder once he was spotted. He turned away from them and fled the scene, his green and white figure scrambling higher up the slope.

The others had also followed Sam's gaze, and their aggression only grew.

"Dream," Bad growled under his breath.

Sapnap's fire crackled and spat more viciously than ever. "We need to go after him."

They did. They had to, and Sam would be lying if he said he didn't *want* to. He wanted nice, cold revenge for everything that smiling bastard had done. But he didn't want to leave an injured Tommy alone on the battlefield.

"You guys go," he said to his friends. "I'll stay here."

"Sam, if this is because of me, then you're an idiot."

Tommy snapped the shaft of the arrow. It left behind a small segment still embedded into his leg. It was not enough to hinder him in a fight, and not too little to accidentally dislodge it and let the wound bleed abundantly.

"It'll take more than that to kill me," he smirked, then frowned. "I always thought I'd be the one to come face to face with Dream in the end, but I don't think that's going to happen. One on one, L'Manberg versus Dream, the finale. That was how it should have ended."

It would have been poetic if the history of the SMP's wars finally wrapped up with Tommy and Dream facing off in a duel. However, poetry be damned – Sam wasn't going to let his son get killed by that monster. Never again.

Tommy reloaded his pistols. "I'll stay and fight down here. That's the least I can do." He looked at Sam, and winked. "You guys will beat him up really bloody good for me, won't you?"

Sam forced himself to smile back. "We'll try our best."

"Then stop talking to me and go kick his ass!"

Sam didn't need telling twice. After a final, silent prayer to the gods to protect his boy – boys, in fact, all three of them, Tubbo and Ranboo included, wherever they may have been fighting at that moment – he ran off, followed closely by Bad and Sapnap on his heels.

As they sprinted towards the mountain, they yelled to any of their allies who would listen that they had located the Nightmare and invited them to join the manhunt.

Barely anyone did, which was to be expected. Everyone was terrified of Dream, and ordering them all to kill him was much easier said than done.

As the trio began their ascent, only two other fighters scrambled up the rocks with them. One was a young woman with ash blonde hair wound into a braided bun and

carrying a crossbow over her shoulder. The other was a reindeer hybrid with two magnificent antlers, dappled blue spots contouring his eyes like a mask.

Sam had to blink twice. "We... we thought you had left the SMP," he stammered.

"And leave you all behind?" Alyssa smiled and shook her head. "Not a chance. You're our friends."

Callahan agreed with a silent nod. He never spoke, and Sam was reassured to see that at least something in the original Eight hadn't changed.

"We still can't ask you to risk your lives for us," Sam said.

"You don't have to. We're doing it anyway," replied Alyssa. "The SMP is our home and Clay was our dear friend too, but his reign of terror has gone on for long enough."

"We're going to have to kill him this time."

Her gaze turned sad, and her smile even sadder. "I know," she acknowledged quietly, "but he's given us no other choice."

Sam still tried to find something to prevent them from risking their necks, anything to get them out of harm's way.

It was Sapnap who stopped him. "We need all the help we can get, trust me Sam."

So with no other objections, the five of them continued to climb up the dusty mountain path. It zigzagged up the rocky face in a linear pattern, bordered by dry clumps of grass and bushes with leaves that looked like they were fashioned from the dry varnish of old oil paintings. Sharp and steep corners had them scrabbling and jumping over them. Sam and Sapnap had a slight advantage thanks to their time spent on similar paths in the Antarctic Commune's tundra, and helped the others when they could.

Unfortunately, the added weight of their armour, weapons, shields and dread did hinder them considerably. They were all breathless when they reached the top, or rather the end of the path.

Sam's heart was pounding, and only quickened when he saw the large, yawning hole gaping before them. Rusty rails and a heavily damaged minecart stood guard outside, almost beckoning them to venture into the void beyond.

With the signs of a previous, explosive battle in the field down below and now relics of some sort of mining operation, Sam began to wonder what exactly had taken place in this very valley.

"He's taunting us," Bad growled. "This could be a trap."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Sam agreed, "but we do outnumber him, so maybe we've got a chance."

"This is Dream we're talking about," the demon argued, tail anxiously curling around his arm. "Numbers mean nothing to him if he thinks he can defeat them easily."

"I'll be honest with you all, I don't want to rush in there and kill him," Sapnap blurted out.

Gears in his head already churning, Sam agreed. "We need to devise a plan of our own that won't have us wasting all our energy—"

"No," the fireborn interrupted. "I mean, I don't want to *kill* him."

Sam stared at him blankly, trying to see if his friend's hesitation was a simple joke or not. "What do you mean?"

"He's my best friend, Sam," the other sighed. "I know this whole ordeal is to bring him to justice, and locking him up doesn't work, but you can't expect me to just kill him with no hesitation."

Sam didn't understand. Well, he did, but he didn't. "You used to be the most eager one out of all of us," he reminded him.

"That was because we were talking hypothetically, and shit was still on paper. Now it's happening, and it's harder than I ever thought it would be. I mean, him, George and me were the Dream Team. He saved me from a life of slavery. He trusted me, helped me and loved me. I want to kill the evil in him, not Clay."

"At this point in time, he is the evil, not corrupted by it. He made that abundantly clear so many times." Sam didn't know what else to say. "You can back out if you want to."

"No." Sapnap's reply was firm. "Just let me try, alright? I'll have one last chat with him and if it goes south... then we'll have no choice."

His flames had extinguished almost entirely, his body now a smoking husk clad in armour. That was when Sam realized that he was being serious.

"Sapnap should go in first," Alyssa suggested. "We can sneak in behind."

Callahan and Bad agreed with her, then turned to Sam for his accord.

He saw no other option and nodded along. "Is that alright with you, Nick?"

Sapnap's long abandoned name slipped out on its own accord, but his talk and their present company had made Sam nostalgic.

The fireborn also seemed a little taken aback, and the pained look in his eyes only seemed to grow. "Yeah, that's fine."

"Well, then..."

After another moment of hesitation, the group stepped into the opening and were soon swallowed by the darkness. The only light they had was Sapnap's glowing veins and the small flames he summoned regularly in the crook of his palm.

They found themselves treading down a corridor that looked like part of an abandoned mineshaft. The minecart rails continued down the middle, and old tools littered the floor as if they had been abandoned in a hurry. The low ceiling was held up by unstable, rotting support beams and dripping moist. Sam had to duck his head a little to fit through the passage. For a while, that's all there was: a cramped passageway going on for seemingly forever, a pungent, humid ceiling, walls glittering with water residue and unclaimed ores, and a rusting railtrack leading them to gods knew where.

The sounds of the raging battle faded the further they marched into the mountain, until they silenced completely. They had never felt more alone, or vulnerable. No one said a word. They wouldn't be able to scream for help if anything happened to them. Sam began to doubt if anyone would ever find their bodies either.

Alyssa's small hand found his own and held on tightly, enough so he could feel it through his armour. He looked down and squeezed it back, careful not to crush her fingers with his gauntlets. He watched as Callahan nuzzled into her shoulder, and how Bad's clawed hand latched onto his armoured shoulder.

The only one who didn't huddle with the others was Sapnap, who stayed in the lead and kept his gaze forward. He looked to be the bravest and most determined of them all,

but the stumbles in his step and the trembling in his limbs told another story completely.

Before he could make a comment, Sapnap froze and pressed himself against the wall. The others copied him.

"There's a light up ahead," he whispered, extinguishing the flame in his palm.

Just around the corner, a grey light cut through the inky black inferno, and the humidity began to glow silver rather than gold. Sam couldn't see much from his spot against the wall, but he could hear echoing footsteps in the distance – slow, deliberate, almost knowing. Knowing that someone was there, and simply waiting for them to strike first.

The footsteps of a genius, an oracle, or a madman. Perhaps even a mix of all three.

Sapnap looked back at them. Sam gave him a single nod of encouragement, and the fireborn took it as a sign to move. He took a deep breath, pushed himself up from the wall, and walked confidently around the corner. Sam shuffled to his vacant place, stopping the rest of the group with a hand gesture. No one breathed.

He could see a lot better now, although his view was still hindered by the rocky turn. A cavern awaited them beyond the exit, as did a green warrior with his back to them, even as Sapnap approached loudly.

Sam spied a few piles of rubble and barriers of stalagmites, big enough to hide them all and close enough to make a break for it. He drew his friends' attention to them, and waited.

He made sure that Dream was still turned around. Then, he gave them a sign and snuck out of the passage.

He quickly and quietly made a bee-line for the stalagmites, and crouched. Bad joined him, while Alyssa and Callahan sought refuge behind a pile of rubble.

There was a tense moment when none of them dared to move, too overwhelmed by their thumping hearts and fear of being discovered. Sam expected a sword to be held to his neck at any second.

When nothing did happen, he levered himself up a little and looked out between two of the spiked dripstone peaks. He could finally get a good look at their surroundings, and they were breathtaking.

The inside of the mountain wasn't at all what Sam had expected going in. Whereas as the passage was dark and dingy, the cavern it led to was far from so. Walls damp with limestone-filled water encircled the room, second and even third levels carved into them and littered with remains of a mining operation long since called off. The ceiling was high and hung with clusters of stalactites, some of which had grown so far down that they had created ornamental pillars on the outskirts. The silvery light they had glimpsed from the entrance tunnel was due to an oculus-like opening on the ceiling near the back of the room that let in the sunlight. Rays danced on the mirrored surface of a shallow lake below, the waters sparkling with a cool, icy hue. It was fed by a couple of thin streams cascading down a rocky wall. Their trickling tinkles filled the air, as did a light, airy cavern breeze.

It was almost like walking into a cathedral, the only man-made building that could dare rival the natural magnificence of this new, deceptively beautiful battlefield.

And the only priest in sight – or perhaps the cathedral's god, as Sam was certain he would have liked to be known as – was pacing back and forth by the lake's edge. At one point, he crouched down and began to drink with large handfuls, seemingly unaware of the fireborn loudly making his way towards him.

It was only when Sapnap raised his voice and called to Dream that the Nightmare turned around.

Sam quickly crouched again and pulled Bad down for good measure. Now his view was completely and utterly blocked, he could only hear the confrontation.

And he could only wait with baited breath.

"Sapnap!" Sam could almost hear the gleeful sneer in Dream's tone.

"Don't use that fucking tone with me," the fireborn snarled back. This time, Sam could most definitely hear his resentment along with his reluctance.

"Someone's in a bad mood."

"Yeah, no shit."

"Is it Karl? Are you having some loverboy issues? I never got to congratulate you on your engagement, by the way—"

"Shut up."

The footsteps stopped, but no blades were drawn. No flames flared up. They must have been at a comfortable distance from one another, or at least comfortable enough to battle with words rather than actions for now.

"I'm assuming I'm not invited to the wedding, then. It's a shame, really. I recall you wanting me as your best man, back when we were kids. I always thought I'd be with my best friend on his special day."

"It'll be difficult to attend once you're dead."

"Ah, so you *are* here to kill me then."

"I don't want to," Sapnap replied in a shaky, confessional tone. "Others do though."

"Like the people you brought with you?"

Sam felt his heart stop. Bad's tail tightened around his leg.

"What people?" the fireborn asked.

"Oh come on, Sap. I'm not dumb, and you're not either."

"So what if I brought some allies with me? You expect me to try and face you alone?"

"You were always eager to."

"That's the difference, Dream. We were friends back then. Now you're a dangerous enemy."

"So, you're scared of me, then? Are we not friends anymore?"

"As you said, I'm not dumb. I'm smart enough to know that I won't be able to face you alone."

"You've changed, Sapnap." Dream's sigh drifted around the room like an unsettling, chilling breeze.

"I've grown, unlike you. I mean, all this and more just for two discs? Fuck."

"It's about much more than just the discs now."

"At least you've dropped that, then. An all-out war involving all the nations and the fucking dead would have been a little too over the top to simply rob a *child*."

The Nightmare laughed, his chuckle as sinister as ever without seeing the face it belonged to.

"*This* is what I've missed," Dream said. "I've missed you. You're loyal, you have a good sense of humour and you're a brilliant fighter. Why can't it be like that again?"

"Because it can't," Sapnap replied simply. This time, there was a hiss – a blade being drawn. "I don't want you to die, Clay, but others do and I won't be able to save you from them."

"So this is what this discussion's been, then? Your attempt to get me to flee?"

"Exactly."

"Mhm."

None of them spoke for a while, and Sam was tempted to sneak a peek at the scene once again. Just as he was about to, however, Dream's voice and Bad's hands pushed him back to his hiding place.

"The thing is, I'm not a coward," tutted the Nightmare.

"No, but you're an idiot if you think you'll get off scot free. Just leave, Clay, please. I'll cover for you. I can kill a deer and take its heart, show it to everyone and say it's yours. You can start a new life." Sapnap sounded desperate now. "Just *leave*."

"That's not going to happen. I either win, or I die trying."

"Then I'm sorry, Dream. We gave you your chance."

That was the cue. Undecided beforehand, but ever so obvious.

Sam stepped out fully from behind his hiding place, followed suit by the rest of his friends. He forced himself to stay put a little longer. Long enough, at least, to watch Dream's masked face slowly pan to each of them in turn.

"You think four ghosts are going to scare me?" he scoffed, mocking. "Three of them haven't been seen for ages, and the fourth I distinctly remember impaling myself."

Sam gripped his trident tighter and held his tongue.

"You're on your last life, Dream," Sapnap warned. His sword, just as Sam had thought, was indeed drawn, and his skin was starting to flare up again. "Be careful of what you say and do."

"Do you think my mortality scares me? Oh, please. There used to be a time when everyone lived on a single life, and they were far braver than anyone I've seen in the SMP. Why would one life or three make a difference?"

"You're one sword's blade away from dying for good, and no one will be able to bring you back this time."

"Of course they won't, unless they have the Revival Boo— oh wait, they don't. I have that knowledge. Killing me kills it for good."

"And you know what, Dream?" Sam said, finally speaking up. "I hope it does. The Revival Book brought about far more trouble than you or it are worth."

Dream's unmoving smile pierced through his soul. "Bold words coming from someone who was ready to watch the world burn just to revive Tommy."

"And he's alive."

"So you're ready to destroy the knowledge now? You've got your bratty kid back, and now you want to dispose of it. Selfish, much?"

"I think you'll find you've revived everyone else for your army," Sam retorted. "I don't think we do need it anymore, do you?"

Dream didn't say anything after that, and Sam revelled in the small but significant victory.

"Like Sam said, there's nothing stopping us from killing you anymore," Sapnap continued.

"I think you'll find there is."

"What is it?"

"Me."

Just like that, Sapnap locked his blade with Dream's, and the dreaded battle finally began. The rest of them all lunged at once, which proved to be a huge mistake.

Something happened, they weren't sure what, and they were all shoved back in a tangled mess. Bad tripped over Sapnap's cape and his own tail, dropping his sword and shield in the process. Alyssa misfired an arrow from her crossbow that hit the ceiling. Sam found himself desperately trying to yank the prongs of his trident out of the twisting branches of Callahan's antlers.

"Children, please," Dream purred in a highly mocking and condescending tone. "One at a time."

They had no concrete plan. Part of Sam had been hoping that Sapnap would have managed to talk Dream out of the whole thing. With no such luck, they had no choice but to stand and attack. He just hoped that their unsynchronized lunges weren't going to end up being more of a curse than a blessing. They couldn't talk it out or prepare. They just had to go for it, and concentrate harder than they ever had in their lives. Sam stood back for the first couple of fights.

Bad ended up being the closest and after righting himself, he readied his sword and shield. Dream's blade smacked down on it with such a force that it almost made the demon buckle, but not quite. As soon as his opponent yanked the blade away, Bad got down low and aimed at Dream's legs. He swung his sword first and then his shield. Dream leapt over both of them with ease and brought his foot down, twisting Bad's arm and almost breaking it in the process. The demon shrieked in pain and fear.

Callahan was the next to break onto the scene. He had no war cry, no sharp jabs of tongue or last threatening words. He rammed straight into Dream with his antlers out. The Nightmare caught them with ease and flipped the reindeer hybrid over, as easily as a skilled matador would with a bull. Almost immediately, a shot was fired straight at him from above, where Alyssa had managed to scramble to one of the higher levels.

Her aim was shaky, but almost on point. Unfortunately, almost wasn't enough.

Dream was fast, faster than she could reload the crossbow. He revealed a trio of sharp, silver knives fastened to his belt and threw one straight at her. She ducked just in time. It shattered the glass of an old oil lamp hanging from a support pillar.

Dream prepared to throw another one, but this time, Sam was quicker. He caught the Nightmare's forearm between the prongs of his trident and just as Dream had done to Bad, he twisted it. The knife was dropped, but Dream was far from fazed. He nimbly

used the trident as leverage and with a few, shockingly skilled parkour skills held the upper hand again. A few moments later, Sam had the air knocked out of him and his weapon was flung away towards the entrance.

Dream came towards Sam with his knife aloft, ready to throw again. Fortunately, Callahan leapt in and shoved him away just in time. He missed his shot. The second knife shattered against the rocks, and he was shoved into Sapnap's waiting, burning wrath.

"You want to dance, Dream?" the fireborn spat. Flames curled out of his mouth like a dragon, and the rest of him was nothing more than a moving mass of netherite armour trying to contain a roaring blaze.

Again, Dream's expression was hidden, but the way he braced for the imminent impact without so much as a shiver told them all that he was completely unimpressed with everything being thrown his way, including the dangerously flared up fireborn.

"Sapnap," he hissed in a sing-song voice, "remember our battle in the lava, when I beat you in your own element?"

"When we were friends? Yeah, I remember. We went easy. We weren't trying to kill each other."

"Is that what you think?"

Dream threw himself first at Sapnap, crossing their swords' blades and pushing back against the fire. His clothes and armour burned. Paint from his mask began to singe and even melt away, but still he pushed and pushed with no fear.

He eventually managed to get Sapnap near enough to the edge of the lake to risk parrying and flicking some of the water up into the fireborn's face with the tip of his sword and his foot.

It was only a few drops, but enough to make Sapnap scream in pain. He staggered backwards, hands groping blindly at the new, searing scars that had appeared along his boiling skin.

Even with no trident, Sam went for Dream again, joined by Bad who quickly tossed him his sword. The two of them faced the Nightmare and tugged him into a two versus one battle. Sam attacked, Bad defended, and Dream parried every move with ease.

Dream was inhumane in so many ways, and the way he fought was only one of them. He was far more creature, demi-god or even deity than mortal in the heat of a fight.

And Sam was just a man when faced with him. A man who still, unfortunately, was not a master of the blade. When the sword was ripped from his hand, he ran a couple of steps to retrieve it.

Footsteps ran up to him. "Sam!"

He did a double take at the voice and looked up in shock. A small, lively and armourless figure sped up to him, Sam's own trident grasped tightly in his hands.

"Ponk?!"

"Here! You need this, stoopid!"

Ponk tossed him his weapon of choice and beamed a self-satisfied smile. Sam breathlessly smiled too, but it soon morphed into fear when his eyes wandered back to Dream.

"Move!" he screamed.

Ponk turned around, and Dream threw. The third and final knife struck his chest.

He fell to his knees with a wail, clutching the hilt. Sam stared back in horror, paralyzed to the spot.

It was Bad who brought him back.

"Sam! Get him out!" yelled the demon, and blocked another of Dream's attacks with his shield. Callahan and Alyssa scrambled to join their friend as backup.

Sam came to, and wasted no time and picked up his saviour. He then rushed them both behind a jagged collection of large stalagmites that offered a small, secluded spot near the wall. There was just enough room to lay Ponk down and for Sam to crouch by his side.

They were cut off from the chaos, which was good. What wasn't good, however, was the knife in Ponk's chest, and the amount of blood trickling out of the wound.

His breathing was shallow and jerky, and ever so close to disappearing completely.

Sam couldn't let that happen. He couldn't. He began to gently shake him, desperate to keep his eyes open and his mind aware. Ponk couldn't slip away. He couldn't.

"Ponkie, please, hang in there. Hang in there..."

There was only one thing that Ponk wished he had managed to steal in his lifetime: someone's heart.

He was a good thief, but that had always been a prize far out of his reach.

There was a time where he thought he had come close, but had been caught in the act one bright day in the lemon orchards.

Even so, Ponk still looked upon that day fondly. He had the chance to be honest, back then, and he had taken it. Gods knew he should have been truthful a little more often.

Yet even when lying on the cold, damp floor of a cave, a knife embedded deep into his chest, he still refused to be so.

"It's just a scratch," he teased weakly.

"Shut up!" Sam snapped back.

He was kneeling down beside him, trident and battle-hardened disposition abandoned in favour of clumsiness, panic and a waterfall of tears that he tried to hide. It was kind of cute.

Ponk had no way of knowing that following his old friends' path up the mountainside would lead to this. He just wanted to stick by them and apologize for a few things.

Although maybe taking a bullet for Sam was forgiveness enough.

"Seriously, Sammy, I'm fine." He lifted himself up to prove his point, and cried out.

"No, you're not. You've got a fucking knife in your chest!"

Sam continued to panic, his movements getting more frantic by the minute. He kept repeating mantras of murder and revenge, and every word made Ponk flinch. Every word and stern action was the Warden's, not his beloved Sam's.

Eventually, rough, armoured hands reached the trouser sleeve covering his leg, and rolled it up. There was silence as Sam stared at the three hearts tattooed on Ponk's calf – or rather what was left of them.

"You've got one life," he realized with a growing horror. "You had three. Everyone has three. Where are they...? Where are they, Ponk—"

"You took this one from me when I tried to break into the prison," Ponk whispered, pointing to the first, spoiled mark, shot through by an arrow. "I gambled the other away in Las Nevadas." He chuckled, regretting that impulsive decision. "Quackity's a convincing man, I'll tell you that much..."

He didn't dare cross Sam's gaze, but he knew that what he had just said had frozen him up completely. The Warden melted, and finally, the love of his life returned to his side.

"You're... you're on your last life," he murmured.

"Not for long."

Ponk gazed back at him. Just as he had expected, pure and utter terror greeted him.

"No, you're not going to die like this!"

Sam tore off his gauntlets and started to fumble at his reserve of potions with trembling fingers. The vials slipped from his grasp and shattered on the floor. He got down on his hands and tried to save any measly drop he could, hoping that it would be enough.

Ponk knew for a fact that it was pointless. He had trained himself in medicine, and he knew when it was hopeless to even try to patch up a serious wound. He was going to die, Healing potion forced down his throat or not. There was no time to get any help.

"You're not going to die like this!" Sam yelled at the top of his lungs and held his head in his hands, trembling like a leaf.

Ponk simply watched him and tried his best not to laugh. Part of it was funny, seeing a big strong man like Sam break down over so little. Part of it was a little pathetic, and made him cringe. Part of it even made him want to cry.

"I don't want to die with you acting like a wet rag beside me." Ponk reached out and weakly held his hand. "It's not a good look on either of us."

Despite the brutal war raging on the other side of their rocky alcove and down the mountain, Sam's hands were beautiful, with no blood or recent wounds to be seen. They were a little red, raw and sweating, but what the heck. Ponk couldn't have everything. If he imagined a little, he could almost feel their warmth and softness radiating through the cold, dead metal of his bionic arm.

It didn't matter. Ponk loved him regardless. He always had.

He had fucked it all up that day in the lemon orchard, but he was cocky enough to offer himself a redo. Here and now, as he bled out on a wet, cold slab of stone with the ruckus of old friends tearing each other apart in the background.

"What would you do if I said I loved you?"

He knew from the distant and sorry look in Sam's eyes that it was too late for that. Sam's heart was given fully to someone other than him. If he was being honest, he had even sort of expected it. Ponk didn't care though – he just wanted Sam to humour him one last time.

He wanted to live a dream, or rather a lie, for a few more moments if that meant he could die happily.

"Well, I would try and see if it was a joke or not," Sam began, uncertain. His voice shook.

Ponk let out a breathy chuckle. "I'm good at jokes, aren't I?"

His heart swelled when he saw a small, sad smile tug at Sam's lips, and when a breathy laugh of agreement escaped him. Sam nodded and wiped his eyes. "Then, I would reach out and hold you tight," he continued, and did just that.

Ponk now found himself cradled against a cold, golden armoured chest. His own still heaved with some difficulty. There wouldn't be much time left. "What would you say?"

Two enchanting pools of green gazed down at him. "Something to make you smile."

And Ponk did, just as the end grew nearer. He made himself a little more comfortable in Sam's arms and let out a content sigh.

"Maybe it would have worked out between us in another life," he mused.

Sam paused, eyes glistening. "Maybe," he murmured back.

Ponk used his last ounces of strength to squeeze Sam's hand. He loved him. He always had. He always will. And yeah, maybe they would have worked out in another timeline – not this one, but in another perhaps. There was always a chance.

Next time, he promised himself he'd hit the jackpot. He was sure of it.

"Have a good life, Sam," he whispered. "Please, for me."

"I will, Ponkie. I'm sorry, for everything."

Ponk forgave him. He always did, and he always would no matter what. It was foolish of him, he knew that. Some things were unforgivable but in his final moments, his heart overpowered his head.

As Ponk felt his eyes close for the last time, he felt loved. It wasn't in the way he wanted, but at least he was. He was in the arms of the man he loved. In the end, that was all that had ever mattered to him.

There was still a beat in Sam's heart for him, and he'd hold onto that until Death came to take him away.

It was the music he took to his grave.

Sam had never had anyone die in his arms before.

He had always pictured it as something that came from romantic tragedies and legends. A final goodbye meant for only one person, the chosen one the dying wanted to hear, see and feel. A chosen one who would be their last taste of the world before they left it.

The stories left out the horror of it. It was a front row seat to watch someone fade away. Sam could see the light drain out of Ponk's eyes, could feel his breathing still, and finally, his body fall limp in his arms.

For a fleeting breath, Sam thought that he had killed him himself – that somehow, his touch had caused it.

That proximity to the sudden death of a loved one was chilling. Sam simply knelt there for a while, unable to do or say anything. He cried, and that was about it.

But crying was useless. It wouldn't bring him back.

Ponk wanted him to live a good life, despite everything he had done and subjected him to. He couldn't deceive him again.

He found the strength to finally let go of Ponk's body, tucking it safely against the stone barrier and brushing his eyes closed. He stood up and emerged from the shadows, walking straight into the middle of the ongoing fight.

Instinctively, everyone stepped back and lowered their weapons a little. Even Dream didn't move. All eyes were on Sam.

"Are you happy now, Dream?!" he shouted, tone still shuddering from the aftershocks of crying. "You killed Ponk! He was armourless, weaponless! He did nothing wrong, and you murdered him!"

The cavern had never been as silent as it was there. Every fighter let down their guard in one way or another. Sapnap's flames lowered to a simmer. Bad's tail drooped, and he clutched his heart through his armour. Callahan and Alyssa shared a grief-stricken look.

Even after years and years, despite them growing apart, sometimes even to the extremes, the original eight members of the SMP had always been alive and well. Despite everything, they were founders, veterans and the ones who had started everything.

Now one of them was dead, and history shifted.

Everyone felt it – including, it seemed, the big bad Dream himself. His shoulders slumped a little and although his mask was still motionless, a single, shocked breath escaped into the silence.

As quickly as it had come, however, it was gone, and the Nightmare regained his invincible presence.

"He was in the way," he said simply, his tone absent of any remorse or regret.

Sam exploded, though not as literally as he would have liked. If he was a full creeper, he would have run up to Dream, held on tightly, and blown the two of them up if only to protect the rest of the world from more atrocities. Instead, all he could muster was a dark cloud of crackling gunpowder, a fierce, burning odour that made everyone involuntarily step away and an anger so fierce it almost shook the entire mountain.

He was no god and wasn't blessed with any powers, but in that moment he wished he was.

He threw himself at Dream and went straight for his throat. He would have impaled it if it wasn't for a quick, skilled block at the right moment.

Sam yanked his trident away and tried to impale him again. His technique was messy, even lacking. Most of his blows were far from precise and served to simply tire him out more. But gods, he was too angry to think straight.

That wrath was strong enough to put him on Dream's level, and the fight that followed was perhaps the deadliest of all those that had come before it.

Two evenly matched opponents always resulted in a long, grueling battle, but when the two were as insane as one another, it became a horrifying display of raging animals.

Sam and Dream tore into each other. Hits landed heavily on armoured chests and arms. Punches were thrown. Visible skin was raked to bloody shreds. Bodies were driven into the dirt time and time again. Sam's crown got shattered. Dream's cloak was shredded and cast aside.

Somehow, their battle shifted from dry, rough ground to the shallow waters of the lake. Water splashed up and soaked Sam through the cracks of his leg guards. The blood and mud that caked both their feet was washed away, tainting the perfect mirror and bringing the raging war straight into the heart of its sanctuary.

Sam knew that no one else dared to leap in and help. He saw them all grouped around the banks, shifting nervously and unsure of how to react, what to do. He silently begged them to stay put.

This was *his* fight.

He was going to tear Dream apart.

This was *his* victory.

The bloodlust and chase for glory scared him. If it wasn't for the stinging loss echoing from the pits of his heart, he would have lost himself completely. It would have been better if he had.

One slip of sanity broke his crazed momentum, and it was the slip that gave his opponent the upper hand.

Dream gave him a hard shove. Sam crashed against the back wall, almost cracking his head open on the wet stones. His trident escaped his grasp and sank beneath the water's surface. One of the trickling sources fell down on top of his head and soaked him through. The cuts of his head were cleaned, streams of pale red running down his neck and over his armour.

"Here we are again," the Nightmare growled, sword aloft. "You, me and a wall. Seems familiar, doesn't it? This time, I won't make the same mistake."

He raised his sword and kept the blade steady with his hand. The sharp tip was trained on the weakest spot in Sam's armour: his neck.

He willed his arms to move and fight him off. He willed his legs to run or kick. He willed his friends for help.

Nothing, no one.

Nothing except for an approaching shadow. No one acknowledged it, not even Dream himself. The figure made no noise as it walked through the water, and said nothing.

Sam's lives flashed before his eyes. He knew that there was no way out this time. No potions, no reluctantly helpful ghosts, no keys, no loving saviours.

Nothing but the tip of Dream's sword and his poor, vulnerable neck.

The shadow rose up behind the Nightmare, turning soon enough into a clear figure.

"Don't worry, Sammy," Dream cooed. "You'll see your friends soon enough."

And the shadow dealt a heavy blow to the side of his head. Dream dropped his weapon with a cry and toppled over, crashing into the shallows.

Sam didn't move. He stared.

"Go," George gasped. He dropped Bad's shield from his shaking hands. It fell just as heavily as Dream had.

Now was no time for questions, although Sam had plenty. He bent down, picked up his trident, and scrambled back to dry land.

Karl had warned him not to join in on the fight. He may have been blind but he could still see clearly, and the Universe had been sending him the same message.

"You'll break your heart."

That had been the least of George's worries and after intense debate, he left Karl's sight to run to his friends' aid. He had braved the violent warzone with its fire and rubble and lakes of blood. He had searched for Sapnap, for Sam, for anyone he recognized. It was Tommy of all people who told him where they had all gone, and he followed the mountain trail until he found the cavern.

There, he borrowed Bad's shield and snuck up behind Clay, before slamming the heavy metal into his head and all but knocking him out cold.

George had never had the upper hand when it came to fighting Clay. He and Sapnap often teased George for being the "runt" of the Dream Team, all in good fun of course.

Runt no more, he was now unknowingly the closest person that day to taking down the Nightmare once and for all. George hated that thought.

Nevertheless, he didn't help Clay up, instead watching as he staggered to his hands and knees. His mask had unclasped during his sudden tumble, and now floated on the surface of the lake, drifting away from its owner.

For the first time in forever, George fully saw the face that had terrified the SMP. He took in the pale complexion, the light freckles dusting his cheeks, and the emerald eyes that still glimmered with a bright spark of youth. Even just looking at him made him want to smile, laugh and go play a prank on some poor unsuspecting soul.

George would never understand how such a boyish man grew to become such a monster.

Clay pressed his palm to the side of his head and let out a long, low groan of agony. It rang out across the cave, just as loudly as the blow must have been ringing in his ears. The pained grimace soon morphed into bitterness and Clay shot a dangerous scowl towards his attacker.

That was when he seemed to realize who it actually was.

"George?!" he spluttered, aghast. "What the—"

"Stop it," George spat. "Just stop it. You've done enough harm. Just leave it."

Dream blinked at him for a good minute or two, clearly incapable of processing what he was seeing, or even hearing.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he replied sharply.

George shrugged, forcing himself to stay nonchalant. "Maybe, but I know who I'm talking to."

"You don't know me."

"I do. I'm talking to Clay. Not to Dream, or the Nightmare, or whatever horrid name they call you now."

"He doesn't exist anymore."

"He does, he's in there somewhere. He's not dead, not yet at least."

"You don't know that."

"My heart would have broken long ago if that was the case."

George knelt down beside him. Clay simply stared, breathing heavily. Still on his hands and knees, his eyes were alight with animalistic fury. And yet, Clay was still there. He had always been there – occasionally overshadowed by hate, rage, corruption and a lust for blood, but still there nevertheless.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Clay spat again, sounding less and less certain as their conversation dragged on.

"I do," assured George, "now more than ever. I love you."

"Really?" the other scoffed. He turned away. "Now you decide to confess? Great timing, George. Great fucking timing..."

"I love Clay, not his façade. Please, come back to us, to me."

He reached out to touch him. Clay shifted away, mouth tensed up into a scowl of resentment.

That was the straw that broke George.

"Fucking look at me!"

He gripped him harshly by the chin and yanked his face up to his. Clay squirmed, but he couldn't escape. For once, George had the upper hand – and it felt great.

"You've fucked up more than you think you have," he growled, talking straight to the dark, corrupted part of Clay where the true distortion lay. "There's no redemption for you now. Look at what you've done. *Look!*"

He yanked him by his chin and made him face the rest of them. A bloody and soaked Sam, a Bad nursing a twisted wrist, a Callahan with a broken antler, a bruised and battered Alyssa, a scarred and smouldering Sapnap, and a dead Ponk lying alone in the shadows.

It would have been impossible to show him every single bit of damage he had ever committed. The list was long and would take the rest of eternity to cycle through. But at least George could show him some of the pain that mattered most.

It was the agony that had taken hold of their group of eight, the ones who still used to treat Dream as an equal, as their friend even when others didn't. The very same ones who had then set out to kill him no matter the cost.

Finally, Dream saw all the wrong his actions had caused. He had made leaders, warriors, legends, but also lost souls, tired souls, sad souls, and dead souls. Souls who had just wanted to live peacefully, to build a life away from war and harm. Souls who just wanted to live their lives. He had almost single handedly crushed the world they all belonged to.

There was no remorse, so to speak, simply realization. For the first time, Clay seemed to be taking proper note of the rippling consequences of his actions.

It wasn't much, but it was enough for George. He had a feeling that was all he would get.

"Do you see what you've done?" He let go, and watched as Clay sank down further into the lake. "And yet I still love you."

He almost laughed, loudly and madly. Despite everything, he still loved him. He wished he could tear out his own heart. He could feel it swell and warm him up from head to toe. He could feel it beat wildly and erratically, and all for the shivering, wet villain at his feet.

Clay knew how to break his heart in so many different ways, some he couldn't even name or explain himself.

He had to get out of here, and trudged out of the shallows. "I'm leaving you to their mercy," he said through gritted teeth. "They can do whatever they please."

He willed himself not to turn around.

"They're going to kill me, George."

"I know, and nothing's going to stop them. Not you, not me."

"I know," Clay whispered, his voice hoarse.

George could hear the sound of armour being stripped and dropped into the water. He assumed that one of the others had taken it upon themselves to deal with it. He kept his eyes on the floor. He was almost out of the lake.

"But I want *you* to do it."

George froze, as did the rest of the cavern. Despite himself, he looked around.

Clay was still kneeling in the pool, everything that concealed and protected him now discarded. The green cloak and amour were gone, weighed down and practically invisible through the waving depths. His sword was laid in the flat of his palms, and he was holding it out. Drops of water dripped from his hair, falling onto his cheeks like early tears.

A lump formed in George's throat, and he said nothing. He had announced the execution, but never thought he'd carry out the blow.

"Please," Clay whispered.

No one moved for a while.

Then, George took a step back into the lake.

"Don't, George!" Sapnap cried from a distant spot. It felt like he was another lifetime away, even as his hand grabbed his arm. "You're giving him satisfaction."

George turned around and glared at the fireborn. "I'm giving him peace."

He shook off the fireborn's searing touch. Sapnap's eyes were wide and shocked, but he said nothing. He didn't try to stop him again and took a step back. He even slipped on his oilskin gloves.

George trudged back through the waters, snatched up the sword and held it aloft. It was easy enough. One strike was all it would take.

He inhaled a deep breath, face scrunching up with a hard determination. A pitiless scowl. Anything that would stop him from shaking.

He didn't lunge immediately.

He rooted himself into a better stance. He rolled the hilt in his palm to get a better grip. He glared down at the scum beneath him, at the wide, pathetic eyes that had simply given up.

George wished they hadn't. He wished that Clay would leap up with a new lease on his twisted life and wrestle the sword out of his grasp. He wished that he had another plan under his belt, like a trap. Then the others would leap in and the fight would continue.

And George wouldn't be the one to pull the trigger.

But Clay had quite simply accepted defeat, and in the silence, he smiled at him. It was the smile that curved his lips ever so slightly, the one that often stifled a long, ear-splitting wheeze at a dumb inside joke.

It was the one of a young boy, the golden boy that had come to George's farm.

"Come with me," he had asked one day.

"Yes," George had replied, and their fates had been sealed ever since.

Now, one was about to kill the other.

George stooped down to Clay's level. His knees were soaked once again by the silvery blue waters. The lake was beautiful, despite the grime of war that now tainted it in drifting puddles. He focused on the beauty rather than on the way he lined the sword up perfectly with Dream's heart.

He could feel it beat beneath his fingers with the thunder of a lover's drum. He found himself wishing that they had had more time.

But George was right: Clay had fucked up for good, and there was no redemption.

He hesitated a moment more, giving him a chance to say his goodbyes to the world around them. Maybe to Sapnap, for example, who stood on the bank, so far away from the rest of the Dream Team.

But in that moment, Clay's eyes were focused only on George.

"I'll see you again at some point," he said, still smiling.

He was always smiling in one way or another. It was how he first came into George's life, and it would be how he would leave it. How he would leave them all.

George pursed his lips and said nothing. He closed his eyes. In one swift movement, he felt the sword slide in. He held it in for a second or two, then slid it out.

There was no ceremony, no display of gleeful victory. No one cheered.

When he opened his eyes, Clay was gone. The last traces of him were the water around him dyed with blood, the limp body resting against his shoulder, and the mask calmly bobbing in circles.

George screwed his eyes shut again and buried his face in his beloved's dead shoulder. There was no breath, no heartbeat. Nothing but a cold void, colder than the metal armour he had taken off. He tightened his grip, and let his tears fall.

The world seemed to have died along with Clay for a moment, or maybe a few minutes, or hours, or even days. He didn't know. He didn't care.

Clay's body was eventually taken from his arms and hoisted into Bad's. Two more figures gently coaxed George to his feet and out of the water. He grabbed the drifting mask on the way out.

The whole world was spinning, and the nausea only got worse once he stumbled onto dry land. Sapnap rushed to his side and pulled him into his warm arms, burning tears scorching his skin. George felt none of that, unblinking and puffy eyes staring into nothing.

Sam briefly crossed his line of vision, gently carrying another limp body with his head hung low. Sam had never looked so utterly lost. Ponk had never been so silent.

None of them had ever been so silent.

George pushed Sapnap off him and rushed away. He threw up in a dark corner, and sobs spewed out once again.

The hike through the dark entrance tunnel was hard, too hard. George kept tripping and hitting the walls, even with Sapnap as his loyal, concerned crutch.

He was lost, disoriented, and above all sick. Sick of everything, of everyone, and especially of himself. He was lovesick. Homesick, too.

The mask weighed as heavy as a boulder in his hand. The leather straps rubbed his hand. The flat, white disk bounced against his jelly legs.

Once outside of the mountain, he took the time to get a proper look at it. He dragged his fingers over the eerie smile, the cracks and scratches, and the dried blood splatters left over from years of violent battles. Even from up close, he still had no idea what exactly it was made of. Clay had never told him, and now he'd never be able to ask. He almost laughed at how ridiculous it was.

He was vaguely aware of his friends stopping with him, and the way their eyes covered him with pitiful gazes. He ignored them and kept exploring the mask, like a child with a new toy.

"We need to tell them all," Bad whispered, uttering the first words in ages.

George only realized who "them" was when life began to pour through his ears again. The sounds of a pointless war still raging down below. There was no need for it now.

Dream was dead.

George dragged his feet to the edge of the cliff. The world looked so small from so high up, every soldier becoming nothing but a speck among specks.

Stale tears still soaked his cheeks. Shuddering breaths echoed in his ears, and he gulped down a heavy lungful of air. It was refreshing, and ever-so bittersweet. It was painful.

He stood right on the edge. He raised up the mask for all to see.

And the sun finally broke through the clouds.

Chapter Eighty-One: A Blood-Soaked Field

Ranboo had never seen a battle end so quickly and quietly.

Granted, he hadn't been involved many – read, *any* – but he still knew sort of what he was talking about. Usually, it was a matter of who was the last man standing, or a clear victor was decided by which side surrendered first, frequently one had lost the most blood.

However, he had certainly never seen anything like *this* before.

The War of the Undying was bloody and brutal, far more brutal than any of the other ones the nations of the SMP had been dragged into. He certainly didn't expect the end of it to be George simply holding out a mask to them all.

He couldn't recall much of the fight itself. One moment, he was charging into the incoming horde alongside Technoblade, the next he was alerted by shouts of shock and fingers pointed up at the sky. He blamed his enderwalk for his lapse in memory, and the worrying amount of blood covering his sword and armour.

Nevertheless, he squinted into the horizon alongside the rest of the soldiers. Allies or enemies, it didn't matter – they all stopped fighting.

Ranboo couldn't see much from so far away, but rippling whispers soon made their way towards him. Two words made up the majority of what was being murmured around.

Dream, and dead.

At first, the hybrid didn't believe it. The Nightmare, the most feared monster to have ever set foot in the SMP, the terror of nations far and wide, the infamous and unbeatable warrior... *dead*? It couldn't be true.

Ranboo knew better than to trust the word of people he barely knew or remembered, and so he decided to go looking for answers himself.

Making his way through the battlefield was easier than he thought it would be. No one was fighting. No one paid attention to him. He could even put his sword away.

It was like someone had suddenly flipped a redstone switch, brightening the sky and abolishing all thoughts of violence. The enemy, previously so brutal and bloodthirsty, were now calm and docile, gathering with soldiers from the SMP's army as if they hadn't

been at each other's throats moments prior. Out of everything, the puzzling rumour was what brought them all together. Even the raging fires had stopped, smouldering back into nothingness and ashen grass.

Ranboo kept walking, stepping over bodies and abandoned weapons or weaving around planted flag poles until he got to the foot of the highest peak. A decently-sized crowd had already formed, and the hybrid turned his gaze up to the spectacle they were all oggling at.

George stood on the edge, brandishing something in his hand. It wasn't a head, but something that still confirmed everyone's suspicions once and for all.

A mask, Dream's mask.

Ranboo was practically deafened by the cheer that erupted from the crowd.

He himself still stayed silent, trying to get his mind to process what was happening – what had happened.

Dream was dead.

Dream was dead.

"Dream is dead!" someone whooped in delight, throwing himself into Ranboo's arms.

The hybrid still could barely reply. "He's... gone..."

Tubbo hugged him tighter, then pushed away with a bright, toothy smile. "We're free, Ranboo! We're free!"

Tears formed in the corners of his eyes, and although Ranboo was momentarily concerned, he soon realized that they were not sad tears. And that despite everything, the same thing was happening to him.

"We're free," he whispered, and pulled his plucky little ram partner into a tight hug.

Free from worry, free from treacherous enderwalk phases that made him leak information and betray his friends, free from...

Well, he could probably think of more down the line. The most important thing was that they were finally free.

"You've got to be shitting me," someone else interrupted, staggering towards them with a serious-looking limp. "He can't be really dead, can he?"

Ranboo was shocked by Tommy's state. He was bloodied, bruised, burnt and seemed close to falling apart like some rickety tower. His eyes, however, still sparkled, and that reassured him to no end.

"Have you seen the fucking mask?" Tubbo chirped, pointing a bloody finger to the top of the cliff.

George had already started making his way down the trail, followed closely by the other group of people with them – among them, Ranboo could see Sam and Sapnap. The mask was still on view, carried aimlessly by George's side and bumping carelessly against his shin.

Tommy stared for only a second, and he practically shrieked in delight. "Suck it, green boy!" he cackled loudly, earning him approving cries and grins from all those around him.

He wrapped his arms around Ranboo's waist and ruffled Tubbo's hair, still breathlessly laughing and wheezing his soul out. Ranboo had never remembered seeing him so happy, nor as affectionate as he was being.

"After so many years, that bastard will never bother us again!"

In any other moment, Ranboo would have called it simple, wishful thinking. Now, the prospect of peace was far closer than ever before.

Dream's death had broken a curse, and the two armies joined again as one. Their divider had finally fallen, and with him his lies and false promises.

"We won, Tommy!" Tubbo whooped in delight, holding on dearly to the blond-headed menace. "We finally won!"

He wasn't referring to the SMP, but rather to them both. Tommy and Tubbo. After all, their war against Dream had been the first of many, and hadn't ceased until today. This was *their* victory, and it was a satisfying one.

Ranboo grinned, and savoured the sweet, sweet taste of a bright future.

Carl was a good horse. Technoblade had tamed him during his tumultuous first days in the SMP when he had nothing except the clothes on his back and an emerald pendant.

Technoblade loved him, more so than any of his other pets. His dogs were vicious, but they were nothing but dogs to him. They were bred and trained to fight and die in battle. Carl was different.

He was a horse of high quality, with a beautiful chestnut coat, rippling muscles and the strong hooves of a draft horse that had braved many of the roughest of terrains without fail. He was a true war horse, but also a stallion of a kind and gentle temperament. Despite his size and pure strength, he nibbled treats from Techno's hand with the dainty softness of a little pony. He liked when Techno would spend hours brushing him, telling him stories or even singing to him – when he was certain that no one was in earshot, of course.

He was also the first steed Ranboo had ever ridden, which made for some surprisingly calming and enjoyable riding lessons.

Technoblade loved him more than he would care to admit, but he should have known Carl was getting old and battered.

That day, he had charged into battle sitting astride his steed, voices and bloodlust raging. They had parted ways at some point, when Techno had briefly dismounted and a particularly nasty and loud cannonball landed close to them. Carl had bolted with a whinny of terror, and Techno hadn't seen him since.

Once the battle had ended, Technoblade took a long and solemn walk through the carnage, inspecting the dead one by one before a familiar mound caught his eye.

He found Carl lying on his side down in one of the dips in the field, surrounded by blood, debris and discarded weapons. One of his wide, black eyes stared straight into his rider's soul with a red, almost crazed sliver of his eyeball just visible. His breathing was quick and shallow.

Upon further inspection, Techno found out that he had splintered one of his legs.

The piglin picked up a nearby firearm and checked the ammunition. He then held it against Carl's head and fired with no hesitation. The stallion fell limp, and went to join the rest of the corpses lying in the bloodied mud.

The voices screamed in protest. Techno didn't say anything, and walked off. He tossed the gun to the side and grunted back his remorse.

He went back to pacing the field, eyes wandering from mangled corpse to mangled corpse like he was in some horrendous yet boring museum. He had seen so many bodies before, and he was scarcely even fazed by the brutality of some injuries. Every corpse was different to the next in size, species, wound, even allegiance, but in the end they all shared one thing. They were all dead, and there was nothing to do about it.

So instead, Technoblade turned his attention to the living. He was surprised to see that they were still quite numerous on both sides. Many were seriously injured and had lost one or more lives. Some were only slightly scratched, and were putting themselves to good use. They searched the battlefield for friends and loved ones, hugging them tightly when they found them alive and weeping on top of their bodies when they were dead. Others simply followed Techno's lead and ambled through the field in a daze, unable to hide their horror and disgust of the aftermath.

Not everything was gloomy, however, and the elation of victory and defeating the Nightmare still hung in the air. Friends shared breathless and relieved banter with friends, families sighed and made sure to absolutely smother their members with affection. Most importantly of all, however, the infected people of the Badlands had returned and had only just started sheepishly rejoining their long lost allies.

One of these was Bad, who Technoblade had seen scramble down the mountain with Dream's body in his arms. He had laid it beside Ponk's, then moved away as quickly as he could, visibly nauseous and close to tears.

Technoblade watched as he crossed the field towards a figure in diamond armour, with dark, diamond encrusted skin and a bewildered look plastered on his face, as if he couldn't believe everything that had just happened. Skeppy didn't seem to have noticed Bad until the demon touched his arm.

Techno was too far away to hear, but he could see pretty well.

A shocked Skeppy, and a groveling and deeply apologetic Bad. Words were exchanged, and then Skeppy slapped him, hard – that the piglin had heard loud and clear, and even flinched for Bad's sake. Again, more words, and more subsequent slaps. They stopped suddenly, and Skeppy hugged Bad tightly.

Antfrost soon came into view, closely followed by Velvet. He reached a trembling paw up to the demon, almost uncertain if he was real or not. Bad held his hand and smiled,

and the two of them threw themselves into the other's relieved embrace. Velvet was also formally introduced by that point.

Techno looked around, this time looking for the stragglers of the Syndicate. Ranboo was busy laughing with Tubbo and Tommy. Sapnap rubbed George's arm before moving away.

The piglin found Sam crouched down near Ponk's body, head bowed low and unmoving, like a completely frozen statue. Technoblade didn't know what had happened up that mountain trail, but the voices didn't help by vocally hoping it was something gory. Either way, it had ended in two deaths, both of which affected different people in different ways. The piglin decided not to go up to him quite yet, letting him mourn a little longer.

He didn't understand the pain, but he understood Sam. He needed some time, and Techno was going to give it to him.

He couldn't see Puffy anywhere. She was not amongst the dead as far as the piglin could see, and he thanked the gods.

He turned his attention to the only logical location he could think of. Luckily, a procession was already making their way out of the chasm, and it was clear who had won *that* battle. Purpled's surprising presence among them was acclaimed throughout, probably praising him for an act Techno had yet to hear of.

He had a feeling that it was for deciding to do the right thing, just like Bad and the old Eggpire had done. Well, good for him. Perhaps the world's demons were getting better after all.

Techno kept his eyes peeled, and smiled widely when he finally spotted a pair of obsidian-black wings.

From afar, Philza looked unsteady on his feet, with both Nikki and Puffy on either side of him acting as staggering crutches. Technoblade rolled his eyes and started to stride towards them.

"The old man's a little out of it, eh?" he chuckled loudly. "Tell him that I'll be at his beck and call until he—"

He stopped in his tracks.

As he got closer to them, he knew that something was off. Philza's eyes were completely closed, and he wasn't staggering as much as being dragged painfully slowly across the ground.

The two women that accompanied him looked no better. Nikki's eyes were wide, red and frightened, scarred by something that would haunt her forever. She moved with the heavy drag of a zombie, unseeing and seemingly unfeeling too.

Puffy on the other hand was crying hysterically, and looked ready to buckle at any point.

"*Techno!*" she yelled, her voice hoarse and shaking with tears.

Something was wrong.

Technoblade ran as fast as his legs would carry him until he almost crashed into them. He immediately took Phil's body into his arms without thinking, and snapped his head up for answers.

"What happened?!" he grunted, looking from one to the other.

Nikki's bottom lip wobbled and she turned away without a word.

Puffy hiccuped and forced out a couple words through her tears. "He... Someone..." She bit her lip and staggered backwards, shaking her head.

Something in Technoblade's body heaved, and sank rapidly to the very depths of his being. For the first time, he risked a proper look down at Phil's body.

Two arrows stood erect and taunting in the middle of his chest, dried blood crusted at the entrance wounds.

Two arrows.

Two arrows had shot down the Angel of Death.

Technoblade wanted to shake him awake and roughly order that he keep his eyes open. Sleeping was not an option with such a wound. It would make the healing process so much more risky and daunting. He would have even slapped him awake if he knew it would do some good.

Something stopped him. Phil's body was still warm, and the hint of a smirk stretched lazily across his face. He looked very peaceful, far too peaceful for a man who had just been shot through by *two bloody arrows*.

Far too peaceful for the war they had just fought in.

Technoblade had seen a fair share of war casualties in his life, but never one as peaceful and quiet as Philza was. Something was definitely *wrong*.

Trembling hands – a phenomenon so utterly unfamiliar to him – managed to rock the avian a little. It was just enough to make his feathers ruffle in the passing breeze.

"Phil?" the piglin grunted in a soft, low voice.

Philza didn't reply.

Two arrows.

Techno could vaguely hear footsteps approaching from behind him. Curious warriors ventured onto the scene, conversing in hushed, confused voices. He could barely feel their presence. His whole body and soul was focused on his best friend, and his best friend alone.

"Phil, come on buddy." He shook him again. "We've still got the world to give and fight, remember? Don't ditch me now..."

Philza remained just as still, just as unresponsive, and finally the truth ebbed through him.

It hushed the voices. It hushed the whole world. It even hushed his own heartbeat.

The only thing he could feel was the featherlight body in his arms, the long black wings and damaged feathers scraping the ground and brushing limply over his armour. Phil felt started to grow heavier, far too heavy for what he was, or perhaps Techno was just growing weaker.

His strength left him completely, and the unbeatable brick house began to crumble stone by stone.

The piglin raised his head to the sky. There was nothing there – no gods, no demons. It was empty, spotless. The sun had started to set, painting it gold.

Nothing dared look down. None dared to look the Blade in the eyes, nor face what they had done, what they had let happen.

Technoblade *screamed*.

It was guttural, it was loud, and it was more devastating than anything the gods could cast down from the skies. Fury tainted every choked breath. The anger turned into loneliness, and that loneliness turned into tears. Before long, those tears turned into Technoblade pressing his snout into Philza's bloodied, broken body, holding it as close as he could as he wept.

He hadn't done that since he was a child, hardened by horrors he grew accustomed to. He hadn't cried for years.

Techno couldn't understand it, any of it.

Had Philza *wanted* to die? Had he been purposely tempting his Lady back to him? Was that why he had chosen not to wear armour to the fight?

Whatever the reason, it made Techno angry, furious even. Philza could have prevented this, he could have if he *tried*!

He didn't, though. He didn't, he didn't, *he didn't*—

Technoblade grit his teeth and nuzzled his snout further into Phil's corpse.

Someone sank down in the mud next to him. "Philza?" he called softly.

Ranboo, poor Ranboo. Technoblade could feel him shaking with tears, and he knew how painful those were for him. He didn't move to comfort him, however.

If he let go of Philza now, he'd lose him forever. He wasn't ready for it. Not now, not ever.

He'd rather stay on the battlefield forevermore and wait until the moss and weeds would grow over him and cover them both. He would have let the vultures and falcons eat his body and drink his blood until there was nothing left but his bones.

He would rather spend an eternity clinging onto his best friend's corpse rather than spend an eternity without him by his side.

"Technoblade never dies", people always said but gods above, sometimes he wished he did.

Sam was and always would be Tommy's guardian angel, his protector, and every other good thing in his world. He was deserving of all Tommy's love, and more – but he had gotten the memo quite a few years too late.

Philza had been there first, and although he didn't stay, he was still part of Tommy's heart, of his soul. He was bound to him forever, regardless of their differences. Philza was his first father. Philza was his dad.

So when Tommy heard Technoblade cry and saw the black wings hanging limply from his arms, he broke.

"Phil!" he shrieked at the top of his lungs, stumbling through the gathering crowd. The arrow in his leg only pushed in deeper, so deep that it drew more cries.

Jabbing shouts of pain and wails for the avian made up his world for the next few moments, until he was yanked away and pulled into an armoured chest.

"Tommy, it's... it's too late..."

"Let me go, you dick!"

"I know, kid, I know..."

Sam held him tighter than he ever had, but still Tommy managed to slip away. He ran straight towards Techno and shoved Ranboo aside.

He had seen too many deaths in his lifetime, but this one hit differently. Even Wilbur's couldn't compare.

Wilbur had wanted catharsis, Philza had just wanted Tommy to forgive him. He had chosen to fight in this stupid, stupid war for that very reason.

He did so because in the end, he had believed Tommy's words. He had trusted him one last time, and this was where that trust had led him.

"I'm sorry," Tommy whispered, brushing away a lock of matted golden hair. "I'm sorry. I forgive you. I forgive you for everything."

No crow could ever carry that message to him, and Tommy broke down again.

Technoblade didn't push him away. He didn't even look at him. He kept his snout pressed into Phil's chest, right next to the arrows that had killed him.

The one in Tommy's leg burned like fire. He didn't notice when his sobbing became twisted cries of pain until someone finally pulled him away. It wasn't Sam this time, but Tubbo.

"We've got to get you to a healer," he whispered in a trembling voice.

He was crying too, but gods he was hiding it well. The agony in his eyes was unimaginable, and yet Tubbo still pulled himself together and looked out for his best friend.

Tommy finally and fully realized how lucky he was to have Tubbo, and he cried the rest of his bitter tears into his shoulder.

In moments like this, there was only one person Puffy could run to. She needed her anchor, her rock, now more than ever.

"Sam!"

She tore off the battle horns from her head and staggered to her feet. She didn't even need to see him to know he was there. Her heart was drawn to him and in the midst of her tears of grief and pain, she managed to stumble through the crowd and into his arms.

Her forehead met the cool, shiny surface of his chest plate. She could hear his heart hammer underneath it, a beautiful staccato she wanted to keep with her forever.

A firm hand, no longer covered by armour, shakily wove its way into her hair. Sam's fingers were warm and comforting against her scalp and the skin of her neck. That feeling too, she wanted to keep forever.

"I thought I would get there in time," she whispered, pressing flush against him. "He waved to me and I thought everything would be alright, but then the arrow..."

She had been replaying the scene over and over in her mind ever since it happened.

Phil's fading blue eyes, the way he went rigid, the way he innocently stared at her for help, lips unable to speak a single word or let out a single cry. The way he tumbled so elegantly, black wings cushioning his fall like velvet blankets. The *disgrace* of his killer not even giving him a chance to fight back!

Nothing was fair, nothing. She closed her eyes.

"I never thought that Phil..." Sam let out a trembling breath, and pulled her even closer. "Oh gods, Phil..."

She never gotten to properly thank him for raising her little lamb, for saving her at the Red Banquet, for even the smallest things. Now she would never get the chance to.

Everything hurt, from the guilt in her chest to her exhausted legs, and the deep gnash running up the side of her neck and cheek.

She touched in and let out a loud bleat of pain, which immediately caught Sam's attention. He shifted, and she could feel his gaze on her neck.

"Puffy, you're injured..."

"I know, but it's just a scratch."

"No..." Sam's voice was no more than a whisper. "You can't... Puffy, you *can't* die..."

His reply startled her. "Sam, I'm not going to die," she rushed to assure him, then finally saw his face.

She had never seen him in such a despairing, horrifyingly shattered state – even his fatal wound in the prison couldn't seem to compare. Back then, he was still smiling through it all, but today he was on the verge of tears. His whole face was bruised, cut or smeared with blood. His golden armour was dented, deeply so in places she knew would hurt.

She couldn't believe that everything was from one single battle. Years of warfare seemed to have suddenly appeared on his skin, perhaps even centuries.

And the tears starting to fall and his quivering lip? The way his eyes were wide and haunted by the prospect of losing her? The promise in them of an eternal heartbreak, and the lingering shadows of atrocious horrors?

It took her out completely.

She quickly cupped his face in the palm of her hand. "My love," she murmured, reaching up until their noses brushed. "You are everything to me. I'm alright. I'm alive, I promise. I'm not going anywhere. I'm *alive*."

The dam broke. Puffy had never seen Sam cry as hard as he did then. He sank down to his knees and held her roughly, his head pressed against the armour covering her stomach. Heavy hands tightened around her waist and tried to keep her close, slipping and sliding against the metal with sweat and blood, which in turn only made the tears fall harder.

He was practically curled up into a ball when Puffy felt herself tear up again. He was still sobbing his heart out. She hated it. She hated the thought that he was hurt and afraid, and that nothing could stop it. She hated seeing Sam so utterly broken.

Her words of loving reassurance seemed to have been the final blow, and yet it was all she had.

Puffy knelt down to his height and let him hold her fully against him. His embrace was clumsy and desperate, almost like a child's, and he only took in breath when she pressed her lips against his cheek.

"My love," she repeated, unable to find any other worthy words of comfort. "My darling, my world, the love of my life, my king. I'm here, I'm alive, and I adore you."

Always. Forever and ever, no matter what.

Purpled was never one for grieving. He had never been truly attached to anyone before. He barely remembered his parents, and all the other deaths he had witnessed were of people he never held a single thought for.

But watching the army crumble around Philza, now that was somewhat of a reality check. He could see all the love and all the pain in everyone's faces first hand when their eyes crossed the avian's body. People he had never thought he'd see shed a tear cried the hardest of all, like Tommy, Technoblade and Sam.

That made him killing that nameless archer so much sweeter, and more satisfying than any other kill of his that day. That included Wilbur Soot himself. For the first time, those deaths had amounted to something far more important than a simple wage in coins and emeralds. There was at least something substantial for Purpled to take away from it all.

He watched on for a while more, his presence completely ignored in favour of the avian's dead corpse.

At one point, Quackity swooped in from the sky and landed, momentarily frozen to the spot upon seeing Philza. Technoblade snapped his head around and bared his teeth and tusks, growling a warning.

The leader of Las Nevadas didn't say anything. He didn't even look hostile, even when faced with the piglin who had infamously mutilated him for his remaining lives. Instead, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

Many followed in his wake. Sapnap shuffled his way to the front of the crowd and knelt beside Quackity. They shared a look heavy with a long forgotten history and not a single scrap of forgiveness in sight, but they put everything aside for this one moment.

Ranboo shuffled backwards to give Technoblade some space and fell into the line beside them. Tommy and Tubbo sank down to the earth together, soon joined by Fundy who let out a high pitched cry at the sight of his grandfather's body.

Before long, everyone in the near vicinity was down on one knee, all bowing behind Techno like the bright coloured and bloodied tail of a peacock.

Philza wasn't a king or a god, but he was noble enough to be sent off as such.

Purpled was the only one standing. He didn't understand grief. He merely bowed his head respectfully before walking away.

He left the heaviness of the mourning crowd and marched out into the larger field, where some had already started to collect the dead and heavily injured. His eyes wandered all over the landscape, just as they had during the confrontation at Eret's ball. Only this time, he was certain that the person he was looking for was there.

He had gotten a brief glimpse of him now and then near the end of the fight and its aftermath. He was hard to miss after all, all dressed up in white and shining armour like he thought he was some kind of invincible god.

Purpled liked to think he looked and acted more like a chess piece in someone's game, although he would never admit that out loud to him – or maybe he would one day, when the fancy would take him. Who was to say?

He passed George hunched up over a body on the way and looking down out of curiosity, he momentarily stopped to stare at the face he never thought he'd see dead.

Perhaps there was something a bit more satisfying to see than a random archer's death.

Good riddance.

He passed by Dream's corpse without a second look, and finally found the man he was looking for.

"Hey," he called as he got closer.

Punz turned around.

"I heard you did pretty well with a revolution of yours," he commented sharply, crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking around at the field. "Quite the double agent, aren't you?"

"I guess you could say that," Purpled shrugged, pretending that the praise didn't make him as happy as it did. "I heard that you came back."

"Yeah, I did."

"Why did you leave?"

He hesitated and sighed. "It's a long story, Purpled, but I'll tell you one day."

"Purpled?" the hunter teased. "Don't you mean Grayson?"

"No, I don't think I did. My brother's grown up, and he's proved it."

"Thanks, but I think I prefer my old name now."

His brother tutted and rolled his eyes. "You've just gotta make things harder, don't you?" he chuckled, giving him an affectionate but playful and gentle punch to his cheek. "But you know what, I think you're right. Those warrior names were dumb anyway."

"Does that mean I can start calling you Luke again?"

Luke smiled. "Yeah, you can. Frankly, I've missed it."

Grayson missed it too. He missed his brother – and funnily enough, it seemed like Luke missed him right back too.

His ice blue eyes that Grayson hadn't seen in ages stared at him with a softness he had never seen before. It seemed like more than just simply missing him, much more. He seemed to have questions too, although he didn't ask them.

Grayson had a feeling that if he probed him, he wouldn't get an honest answer. Luke might have changed his name, but he doubted that he had changed his whole rough-edged personality. Not yet.

"Let's get out of here," said Luke. "I never want to see or hear about this shit hole of a realm ever again."

For the first time in Grayson's three, now four, lives, he couldn't agree more with his brother.

He smiled. "I'll find us some horses."

The nasty part of any victory, unfortunately enough, was counting and claiming the dead. There were many, and too many familiar faces to bear.

Families, friends and lovers searched the field's corpses when their loved ones didn't reappear. Sometimes, they found them heavily injured but alive, and they were the lucky ones. Most of them were found dead.

The carts were brought in from the SMP. Eret sent out fit riders to get more.

The first ones to leave were the injured. Some were more serious than others, and many doubted they would even survive the trip, but Healing and Strength potions were dealt out to at least maximize their chances. Healing tents had already been pitched up on L'Manberg's old vast, empty terrain in preparation for their arrival.

The next to go were the corpses. Dream's army, at its core, had been made up of the SMP's own people, and they ended up carrying back far more bodies than they had started fighting with. Most were claimed, but some were not. They were usually the bodies of loners or hermits, people who had fought for their nations if for nothing else. They were put into the carts as well regardless.

Everyone would get a funeral. They all had that right.

Only three bodies were left behind.

The first was Wilbur's. Fundy was the one who found him while helping clear the ravine. He stumbled upon him lying face-down in the stream. His blood had been washed away hours ago.

The fox cried a little over his father's body, but ultimately didn't do anything beyond that. He instead stepped over him, picked up the only other remaining corpse – an avian's – and walked back out.

Just as Wilbur had left Fundy to rot alone in a sea of inadequacy and hate, Fundy would return the favour a little more literally. It was only fair.

He assured the others that no more dead were left in the chasm, and no one ventured in to check his claim.

The two others belonged to Ponk and Dream.

Their friends had their own plan for their funeral. George and Alyssa stood guard while the others helped the rest of the army where they could.

Many of the remaining fighters that walked past spat on Dream's body and shot curses his way, both things which George couldn't prevent no matter how hard he wanted to. Everyone ignored Ponk. After all, what was the body of a thief to anyone?

Finally, when all the dead were carted off and the last few soldiers slipped away over the hills, George, Sapnap, Bad, Sam, Callahan and Alyssa got to work. Late evening was already upon them.

They went to the small wooded areas dotted around the edges of the battlefield and chopped down a number of the unscathed trees with abandoned battleaxes. They then cut the trunks into logs and hauled them out to the middle of the field. They built two staggering pyres.

They lay the bodies of their friends on top. Sam didn't let go of Ponk's hand until Alyssa gently coaxed him down, and George didn't let go of Dream's until Sapnap's warm gloved hands had to practically tear him away.

They spent an hour or so after that weaving simple wreaths with the few surviving bits of flora still scattered around.

Wildflowers were piled high at the base of Ponk's wooden resting place. None were laid at the foot of Dream's.

When the moon began to rise, they all solemnly gathered around the pyres. Sapnap slipped into the narrow gap between them and gently lay his bare hands on the smallest of the branches.

The single flames that danced along the twigs and wildflowers soon erupted into a blaze that engulfed Ponk and Dream until their bodies were no longer visible. Smoke curled up into the night sky.

No one moved, no one even cried. The tears that had fallen had done so long ago, and now there were no more left in them to shed.

The Eight were gathered all together in peace one last time, and they remained so until the pyres finally burned away into nothing but ashes.

The remaining six stayed silent and still until the wind carried away the last embers. All that was left was a metal arm and a smiling mask that not even Sapnap's almighty fire had managed to melt away for good. No one went to retrieve them.

It was over, and it was almost like they had ended with it.

Bad was the first to utter the question that had been haunting them all. "What now?"

And for the first time since any of them had known him, Callahan spoke up.

"We move on."

Chapter Eighty-Two: Too Young To Live

And move on they did, for a while.

There were celebrations held all across the SMP. Fireworks boomed from Kinoko to Snowchester and the earth shook with laughter and dancing feet for a day and a night straight. It was a time filled with feasting, forgiveness, love and the giddy excitement of a near, peaceful future.

Not everyone attended, however. Despite everything, the mood of some was lower than it had ever been.

George locked himself away in his home, head smothered by a pillow to drown out the sickening cheers and rejoicing. Sapnap joined him soon after and they both simply sat in silence for days on end.

Ranboo followed Technoblade back to the tundra, where the blank landscape had never looked so bleak and empty. The piglin stormed into his cabin and refused to come out. The hybrid, not knowing what else to do, went back to his shack and cuddled Enderchest until his exhaustion finally knocked him out.

Quackity flew back to Las Nevadas without getting so much as a thank you for his service. As he expected, the nation was empty, except for Charlie who pestered him for hours about what happened. All he did to celebrate was down a shot or two of whiskey. A week or so later, word would reach the mainland nations informing them that the Casino had closed its doors for good.

Sam spent the night and day following the battle by his loved ones' sides in the healing ward, taking over Puffy's care once her gaping wound was stitched up. She woke up from the anesthetic potions to him slumbering by her side, his head buried into his crossed arms that he lay on the edge of her billet. She gently combed her fingers through his hair and smiled.

Tommy was sprawled in the bed next to her and snoring noisily, his leg bandaged and the bloody arrowhead in a ceramic bowl on his bedside table. A loyal Tubbo was conked out on a chair nearby, his hooves propped up on his friend's stomach.

They were alright, and that was good enough for now.

Once the partying was over, things began to fall back in place, block by block.

The Eggpire was duly pardoned thanks to their well-timed arrival and bravery in the battle, and were welcomed back into their respective nations. Bad was reinstated as a ruler of the Badlands and like Antfrost, he worked harder than ever to prove he was worthy of his people's trust.

The rest of Dream's undead army that had tagged along were also pardoned with no qualms, with everyone agreeing that they had been duped and manipulated into taking the lives of their own blood. They were brought back into their nations, and revived ancestors were allowed to choose where they wanted to live out their new lives.

They also held some pretty damning information that interested one faction in particular.

The remains of the Temple's backup army rushed back to the desert and stumbled over their words in their excitement to tell their god what they had just discovered.

Foolish travelled to the abandoned monastery the undead had spoken of, and indeed found the stolen totems piled up like meaningless gold coins in the church. He concerted with the powers higher than himself, who agreed that leaving such power in a place easily accessible to bloodthirsty mortals was a terrible idea. He was also scolded for caving in to Captain Puffy and using one on Tubbo, way back when. Actions had consequences, even for gods.

The rest of the totems were destroyed and with no other vocation in the SMP making them stay, Foolish and his children moved on to wherever his peers decided to send them.

The Temple of the Undying remained, with its priests, soldiers and loyal followers praying endlessly for their god's return, to no avail. The plea was one of the many stories they would pass on to their next of kin for centuries to come, and would never yield any results.

Meanwhile, the mortals held the many funerals for their dead. On the fourth day following the battle, the bells chimed in a slow, dragging rhythm for hours on end, and the joyous celebrations soon turned into a long, gruelling day of mourning. Everything and everyone was draped in black. Countless coffins were lowered into the ground. Numerous funeral piles were built and lit.

Philza was buried on a mountain deep in the tundra, close to the sky. Only very few were told of its location – they were the ones that Technoblade knew his friend would have wanted to say goodbye to one last time.

The whole Syndicate was in attendance. Puffy, Tubbo and Fundy were too. Tommy, whose leg had only just started to stop hurting, insisted that he was strong enough to climb the snowy slopes. He stayed close to Tubbo the whole time, sniffing away frozen tears and frequently wiping his eyes.

There was no magnificent service of adieu, and no eulogy either. No one had the heart to write one. Even the voices hushed.

Goodbyes were done individually, either with the heavy silence or with things they had brought themselves that they threw into the grave. Some brought flowers, others small, seemingly insignificant trinkets – inside jokes or fond memories with Phil that no one apart from them would ever understand. Sam lay down a single, rolled up sketch bound with a long strip of canvas. Ranboo put in a quill.

Michael and Michelle dropped in a picture they had drawn together, then ran to huddle in the arms of their dear Uncle Techno.

The piglin had been certain that his heart had turned to unfeeling, cold ice once his tears had finally dried, but the sudden cuddle from the young piglins, like the warmth of two little candles, made it melt again.

The wound that Philza's death would haunt him forevermore, but perhaps the pain could be dulled from time to time. At least Techno had found the courage to let go of his body and let him rest. At least Philza was loved, and that was comforting enough to get him to tear his eyes away from the six-foot deep hole.

He gazed out across the tundra. Snowdrift after snowdrift, mountain peak after mountain peak, frozen lake after frozen lake. All tundras were the same, in the end, and that was what made them so homely. The frozen, polished landscape was his home. Wherever he went, he knew that wouldn't change.

Techno missed the Antarctic Empire.

He and Philza had built it together and watched fall so many years ago, but the memory still stayed. It was a good and fair realm, surprisingly peaceful despite being headed by the Blade and Death's own Angel. They had fought too much in their lives. They had just wanted a rest – gods forbid people resented them for needing that.

Technoblade wanted to go back to those times badly, so badly in fact that it hurt.

Granted, he wouldn't have become the legend that he was, he wouldn't have the friends he had now, but at least Phil would have stayed alive. He wouldn't have died as he did.

That saddening, tragic day on top of the mountain, Technoblade decided that this tundra would be his tomb as well. He'd breathe his last right over Phil's own grave and be buried beside him.

That was the final slice peace he wanted, and he promised himself he'd get one day.

Even if it had to be by his own hand.

A cry pierced through the grieving quiet and Techno snapped his head around.

Tommy had abruptly collapsed to the frozen ground, and Sam and Sapnap rushed to catch him.

No one knew what had happened, least of all Tommy himself. His leg had just buckled under him suddenly, which didn't make any sense.

Tommy had felt *fine*. The doctors that had taken care of him had insisted that he was *fine*. Sam himself had even given him a hug when he managed to walk a few steps, telling him how relieved he was to see that his boy was *alright*.

Needless to say, everyone got an angry mouthful from Tommy when he was brought back into the healing camp later that day. He felt bad, especially regarding Sam who had tired himself out completely trying to safely carry him down a slippery mountain slope and all the way to L'Manberg. He was sorry, he really was, but he was sick of people just lying to him all the time.

It was agreed however that he would stay at the medical camp for the time being until a plausible explanation came up. What should have been maybe a day or two under surveillance ended up stretching out to over a week.

The doctors were baffled, to say the least. They reopened the entry wound of the arrow and took another thorough look at the boy's leg, to no avail. They asked him questions he had already answered hundreds of times before. They scratched their heads and loudly shared theories with one another as if Tommy wasn't even there. His head was buzzing with far too many made-up sounding medical terms for comfort, and soon enough his migraines outweighed his wounded leg. The pain ended up spreading to the other one too, and he couldn't move them without crying out in pain. He couldn't even go somewhere else to escape the doctors' ramblings.

The only relief that he had from it all was when his friends and family would visit. Nikki and Velvet brought him special batches of treats. Sam and Puffy stayed with him overnight and did anything and everything he asked of them. Michelle and Michael kept him talking with stories they either told themselves or ripped out of him, and Tubbo and Ranboo took his mind off everything with their dumb as shit antics.

And of course, there were his two favourite animal friends who, despite being kicked out by the healers when they walked in through the front door, always found a way to sneak

in nonetheless. Tommy was pretty sure Sam was responsible for Fran "accidentally" digging holes in the earth to squeeze herself under the tent, and that made him smile. But what made him grin the widest was when Nook scampered in and curled up with him at night.

Occasionally though, Tommy was left alone, and those were the moments he hated the most.

Guilt and grief over Phil would come to haunt him, as well as Wilbur's memory. No one had seen his body since the battle, but numerous sources confirmed that he was indeed dead – yet he was still very much alive and well in Tommy's own mind.

Not even Nook's fuzzy, fluffy tail could brush those thoughts away. The boy had a feeling that nothing could. He'd be stuck with them for a long time yet, and he just had to learn to live with them.

It was easier said than done, however, but Tommy powered through the ten days he was kept in the canvas ward that fluttered with the breeze and stank of Healing potions and herbs.

In ten days, people could do a lot – Tommy knew that better than anyone. However, they apparently couldn't figure out what was wrong with his legs.

There had been only one solid conclusion that the healers made that they were a hundred percent sure of.

Finding out that Tommy would never walk again was a strange moment.

Both Tubbo and Sam were by his side, striking up a light, heartwarming conversation with the bedridden boy, when a healer came in and gave it to them straight, unprompted.

The tension that followed immediately after was stifling. Sam silently got up from his chair and started pacing, muttering nonsense to himself about things he could have done to protect the boy better.

Tubbo, in comparison, began to quiz the doctor endlessly on every word: how did he know, was he sure, he needed some actual scientific evidence to back it up, what was he playing at, did he know what his friend had been through—

Tommy took it better than everyone else. He even surprised himself.

He looked from the doctor to Sam, and then from Sam to Tubbo, and from Tubbo to his numb legs concealed beneath the layers of scratchy blankets. He couldn't remember when he had lost feeling in them. He just thought that he had grown used to the pain. He tried wiggling his toes and flexing his knees, to no avail. Things started to make a little more sense now.

"Well, I guess they had a good run."

Tommy looked up at Sam.

"Hey, dad," he called, smiling brightly, "can you make me some cool wings like Philza's?"

Sam looked back at him, seemingly trying to push back tears and more remorse. He came back over to the bed and sat on the edge. Tommy held out his arms. Sam wrapped his own around him.

"Tommy, I'm so sorry," he whispered, "I can't build miracles..."

He couldn't build miracles, but he could at least help in some way. A day or two later, Sam turned up to Tommy's bedside wheeling something that shone in varying shades of gold and copper.

It wasn't necessarily the war trophy he had asked him for, but in all honesty, it was good enough. Better even. At least he could finally escape the healing camp.

After a week of being confined to the same, stinking bed, Tommy finally got to taste the fresh, outdoor air again.

It took him a few days to fully get used to his new wheelchair, but soon enough he was zooming around the SMP with ease and wreaking childish havoc as he always had done with working legs. It was a little easier to catch and discipline him now, however, which was a downside, but at least he could go on his own adventures again.

He did need a little more help than he would have liked at some points. Stairs, for example, soon became an impossible challenge and he struggled with wheeling himself uphill. He also hadn't mastered the art of braking yet.

Living in Snowchester soon became practically impossible with the slippery, frozen cobbles, winding streets and steep path to Puffy's house. Both she and Sam temporarily elected to stay on the Badlands' territory, in the White Mansion, until a solution could be found.

The suggestion made Tommy very happy for two reasons. The first was that he wouldn't have to brave the frozen tundra on wheels, and the second was that he most definitely had a family again.

After all, Sam and Puffy had sacrificed their own comfortable home just to stay with him. That had to mean something, as well as them calling him and Michelle their "kids" when they didn't think that he was listening.

That wasn't to say that their new lodgings weren't as nice as the last ones, far from it. In time, Tommy discovered that the White Mansion was a pretty pog place to live. It had tons of rooms and lots of activity almost every day. After all, he was living in a bloody seat of power that looked like a goddamn palace! He basically lived like a prince, and as an added bonus, he had new people to affectionately bother whenever he wanted to.

Specifically, his new friendly victims were his dad's fellow associates.

Bad in particular was an easy target for him. A single cuss word would have him dropping whatever it was he was doing and rush after him in indignation. Sometimes, he simply sighed and let him off. Sometimes, he made a comment about it to his dad, which would have scared any other kid to death. Not Tommy, though. Sam simply feigned reprehension until Bad's back was turned, and then he would chuckle along with Tommy and wink.

Everyone else also seemed to find his torture of Bad endearing, including, Tommy could tell, the demon himself. With every exasperated sigh often came a gentle tease back, or even a scrumptious muffin to snack on.

The only thing that tended to kill Tommy's upbeat mood was the pity he could see buried behind everyone's gazes whenever they looked at him. He didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him, he was fine. Even if he had to adjust to being disabled, he was doing fantastic. He was living life to the fullest, more than he ever had before.

He vowed to be the best older brother anyone could ever ask for, and he kept that promise by spending time with his little piglin sister. Little kids tended to be nightmares, but Michelle was surprisingly sweet and without having to do anything, rapidly got Tommy wrapped around her finger. Not that he'd admit that to anyone else, of course.

He also tried to be as helpful as he could around the mansion, whether it was cooking or helping clean up the meeting room after a long day of planning and discussions. He got to spend time with his new family and bond with people he never thought he'd get along with.

Antfrost was one of them. The more time Tommy spent with him, the more he *wanted* to spend time with him.

His study was cool as shit too, with all the dead animals and weird guts floating in jars. At first, Tommy thought that he was a mad scientist of some sort, or a serial killer that kept trophies of his victims and gave the rest to his husband to bake into pies.

Turns out, the cat's occupation was a lot more boring.

"Biology, really?"

Antfrost's whiskers twitched with an amused smirk and he climbed down the bookshelf's ladder. "Really," he confirmed.

Tommy gave him an unimpressed look. "Sounds dull."

"I'm sure it does, but I like it. You get to explore tons of things you've never seen before, and realize how interesting the world around you really is. Take this for example."

He pulled one of the books off a lower shelf and rifled through the pages until he stopped on a watercolour illustration.

"I bet you've never seen how a ghast really works," he purred.

Tommy hadn't. To be honest, it wasn't the first thought that crossed his mind when the bastards would shoot at him in the Nether. He did have to admit however that the bestiary he held open on his lap looked pretty fucking interesting. He flipped through a few other pages. Each seemed just as colourful and detailed as the last. He could definitely see how a nerd like Ant would find fulfillment in staring at the diagrams for hours on end.

"So, you're really into anatomy shit, aren't you?" Tommy remarked.

"Not just anatomy," Ant corrected, "but yeah, I'd say I'm very well versed in the topic."

Gods, he really did sound like a pretentious nerd, but for once that reassured him. At least the boy was certain that the cat knew what he was talking about.

He contemplated a single, passing thought for a moment. It was worth a shot.

"So you can see what's wrong with me, right?"

"I... what?"

Tommy patted the knee of his injured leg. "Those healers knew jack shit about it and depended too much on potions, but you might have an idea, right?"

Antfrost hesitated for a moment, brow furrowed and not entirely understanding. "You want me to give you a second opinion?"

"I mean, if you've got eyes, yeah."

Again, the cat seemed hesitant but soon caved in once Tommy encouraged him by rolling up his trouser leg and giving him a grin.

"I suppose there's no harm..."

He crouched down and placed a gentle, padded finger to the festering sore, and immediately proved himself wrong.

That single, gentle caress sent a sudden, painful jolt through Tommy's veins, his nerves and his entire body. His numbed legs could finally feel again, but it was nothing but molten lava running through his veins. He thought his heart was going to explode and he bent forward in pain, gasping for air. His lungs suddenly seemed to have stopped and he choked.

Antfrost immediately yanked his hands away. "Tommy?" he mewled, panicked.

The boy didn't say anything for a long time, but eventually his breathing came back. It was one hell of a wake-up call, however. He could almost hear the blood crawling up his veins, along with something else. Something heavier that definitely should not have been there, like ants skittering through his blood.

"It burns," he managed to gasp out. "It feels like something's eating me alive."

And suddenly, Ant's tail dropped and his ears plastered against his head. "It burns?" he checked in a small voice.

Tommy nodded and fought back the tears of agony. "All over..."

He felt Ant's fuzzy paw on his arm, comforting him until it passed. The burning didn't disappear completely, but it faded a little. Tommy could start to feel a little like himself again despite his aching head.

He glanced up at the cat, and in a small voice, "Well?"

The cat bit his lip and scrunched up his muzzle, then walked over to one of the shelves and took down a large, bulky book. He hauled it into his arms and paused again before gently laying it on Tommy's knees.

"I think this is where you need to be looking for answers..."

The boy read the title.

Oh gods.

He bit the inside of his cheek and said nothing for a long time. "Don't tell anyone about this," he eventually muttered.

"Tommy—"

"Don't," he repeated, a little more firmly, and glared at the cat until he nodded in defeat.

"Not a word," he promised reluctantly.

Tommy was reluctant to stay silent too, very reluctant, and he wheeled himself out of the study without a goodbye. The Holy Grail of answers to all his questions still perched precariously on his lap. His numbed legs couldn't perceive the weight, but his conscience certainly did.

He didn't open the book for a good couple of weeks. He fell sicker and sicker, but kept a straight face and tried to hide it. Breathing occasionally became difficult, and felt the numbness in his legs creep up right to his waist. As a precaution, he began to drink copious amounts of milk a day, hoping that something would change. It never did. If anything, he got worse.

He brushed off everyone's worry, and scarcely crossed Ant's gaze anymore. In it, he again saw the pity he didn't want.

It was only when the last chilly day of February came around that he finally built up the courage and energy he needed.

He excused himself from dinner to the surprise of both the Badlands and their guests that evening. Tubbo, accompanied by Ranboo and their son, was spending the day and the night in their company for a political matter – something about drawing up plans for an Overworld bridge between the Badlands and Snowchester or some shit.

Tommy wheeled himself into the living room. He parked his chair in the spot close to the fire that was cleared for his use, taking out the heavy book he had tactfully concealed behind a cushion. With a deep breath, he opened it and started to read.

He skimmed most of it, the only words important to him being the ones like "symptoms" and "side-effects", as well as more dangerous words jumping out such as "lethal". A couple of hours later, he happened upon a certain page that seemed to ring a distant bell in the back of his mind. He read the article more carefully and traced the watercolor picture of the blue and orange dappled mushroom.

He froze when he realized that it was exactly what he was looking for.

Tommy didn't cry. He didn't scream or yell or throw the book in an angry fit. For once, he remained remarkably calm. With shaking hands, he closed the leather bound volume and stuffed it behind his back, just as the door opened.

"Tommy, sweetheart," Puffy called softly from the threshold, "are you feeling alright?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm fine."

He pretended to be warming his hands by the fire when she walked towards him, a small bowl in her hands. "I know you said you weren't hungry," she said, coming over and handing it to him, "but Velvet did make some delicious crumble, and I know for a fact that you always have room for his desserts."

"You know me too well, Captain," Tommy chuckled.

He took a spoonful and forced himself to wolf it down. He adored Velvet's cooking, but today everything tasted like bitter bile against his palate. He was sure it was delicious, but he couldn't enjoy it.

As he ate, Puffy's hand gently came to stroke his hair, gazing fondly at him. "Are you sure you're alright?" she asked again.

This time, he nodded vigorously and brushed the remaining crumbs away with the back of his hand. "Absolutely."

He handed the now empty bowl back to her and with another smile, she turned to leave.

"Mum?"

She turned back. "Yes, sweetheart?"

Tommy felt a lump form in his throat. "Thank you, for everything," he pushed out, again keeping tears at bay. "I love you."

It sounded like a goodbye.

He watched as Captain Puffy absolutely melted at his words, and came back over to place a loving, tender kiss on his forehead. "I love you more," she hummed.

His heart ached more and more with each passing second, and he truly took in how unbearable it was when she finally left. If this was how all his interactions were going to be, then gods help him.

He waited until he heard everyone finally trudge off to bed, and saw the lights in the switch off under the crack in the living room's door. He waited an hour or two more, then cautiously rolled out and towards one of the doors.

Thankfully, with Sam being the engineering freak he was, Tommy's wheelchair was well oiled and he could wheel around in relative secrecy. Before, it proved to be essential for playing good pranks, but now he had another use on his mind.

He approached the guest room door and, double checking that no one else was in the corridor, he knocked gently. He thought no one had heard him for a moment, until hooves shuffled along the floor on the other side. The door opened a crack, and he was greeted by a scruffy, grumpy ram.

"Tommy, what the fuck?" Tubbo grumbled, half lidded eyes glaring at him.

Tommy plastered on his brightest, most convincing smile. "Hey man, fancy going on a midnight adventure?"

His friend blinked and yawned. "Not really."

"Oh come on—"

"What time is it anyway?"

"Don't know, don't care." There was only so much acting he could do before he eventually snapped. "I have something important I want to tell you."

"Can't it wait until morning?"

"Nope."

"Can't you tell it to me right now?"

"Nope."

He knew Tubbo would cave, he always did.

The ram opened the door a little more and looked behind him. Tommy could just glimpse Ranboo's figure on one side of the double bed, curled around Michael who slept in the middle. Both were snoring relatively loudly. The opposite side of the bed was made up of kicked back covers where Tubbo had undoubtedly been slumbering.

The boy began to wonder when his two best friends had actually started sharing a bed.

"Fine," Tubbo finally sighed. "Just give me two minutes and I'm all yours."

Two minutes felt like two hours, but when Tubbo finally joined Tommy at the front door, time seemed meaningless. He was there with his best friend who looked slightly more rejuvenated than his previous, sleepy self, and he was more than happy.

The two of them soon took off into the night on their own vessel of excitement and seemingly never ending energy. Tubbo pushed the chair, and Tommy guided the way with loud cries of delight. They sailed away from the White Mansion and joined the Prime Path, where they then crossed the border and bolted towards the heart of the Greater SMP.

The paths were empty, the moon was bright and the wind rushed through their ears and hair, giving them both a new lease on life. It was just the two of them, as it always had been from the beginning.

Tommy stopped their race in front of his old, dirt hobbit hole, and directed them both down to the bench.

Their bench.

In their excitement, Tubbo narrowly missed running them both off the edge of the plateau, and instead reeled Tommy's chair back and parked it safely beside the oak tree.

"Help me, won't you Big Man?" Tommy said, still grinning.

Understanding immediately, Tubbo lifted him up with a grunt of effort and carried him to the bench. He set him down, then sprawled out beside him, panting heavily.

Tommy couldn't feel the polished wood under him, but that was alright. He shifted until he was comfortable, until he felt normal again, and lay back.

The oak tree's dark branches shook above him as a greeting, and he laughed.

Tubbo copied him and for a while, they became young, carefree boys again, pumped up by the adrenaline of their nighttime escapade.

Tommy's joy faltered a little when his chest tightened and took a longer time to unravel. The ants in his veins had turned into licking flames, leaving searing trails under his skin. It hurt more than ever before.

"You know what, Tommy?" the ram sighed. "You were right to drag me out here."

"Of course I was," Tommy spluttered in mock disbelief, biting his tongue. "I'm always right, bitch!"

"I can't even remember the last time I came here."

"Me neither."

Even in the dark, he could picture the landscape ever so clearly. The rolling valley, the clusters of bamboo and birch, and the winding river that snaked away towards an unknown point in the distance. Even at night, it was breathtaking.

There was only one thing missing.

"Fancy some music?" he asked Tubbo.

His best friend turned his head and nodded. "Absolutely."

"Right then, the tracks are in the first chest to the right."

Tubbo got up, then looked back and smirked. "Can't you get them yourself?"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "You should get your own stand-up comedy show," he jabbed back. "I'm sure the SMP has a number of rotten tomatoes they'd like to get rid of somehow."

The ram stuck out his tongue and galloped into Tommy's house. He returned a few minutes later carrying a healthy stack of black vinyls. He lay them on the grass and began to inspect the labels one by one.

"Alright, what do you fancy?"

Tommy shrugged. "What's there?"

"Well, let's see..." He cycled through them all, clearly looking for himself rather than fully abiding to Tommy's request. He found one that seemed to interest him and held it up.

"The *Hamilton* one?"

Tommy screwed up his face and shook his head. "That was Wilbur's favourite and I don't want to think of that prick tonight."

"Understandable. Neither do I." He continued to look, then held up two with a puzzled stare. "Uh... Aren't these supposed to be in your enderchest?"

"Not anymore. I took them out. I mean, no one's after them anymore, so why should I hide them?"

Now the discs had no more leverage or military value attached to them, they were no different to any of the other vinyls in his collection. Smooth, round, black, with a colourful label. To think that they had single handedly caused and ceased multiple wars was beyond him. That said, they were an important part of his history, and he fancied listening to them tonight.

"Let's play Cat first," he suggested.

Tubbo agreed without a word and walked over to the jukebox. It was looking a lot worse for wear after ages of disuse, blanketed in dried leaves and creeping vines, but still worked like a charm. The music was crisp and clear, and Tommy closed his eyes to appreciate it.

He heard Tubbo sit back down beside him, and soon he felt his horned head rest on his shoulder.

They may have won the final battle and finally claimed the long-awaited victory over Dream, but Tommy's true peace had and always would be here – in his favourite place, listening to his favourite music, with his favourite person.

In a way, that was all Tommy had ever been fighting for.

"What did you want to tell me?" Tubbo suddenly asked.

The boy's peaceful mindset came crashing down abruptly. The disc screeched to a halt, and there was a deafening silence again.

His throat was dry. He didn't want to answer. He wished he could run away, he really did. Anything but tear down his best friend, and himself in the process.

He had kept telling himself that announcing it to someone would be a problem for future him. But now, this *was* future him, and there would never be another.

There was no avoiding the question, not anymore. The time had come to break down the wall, to flip the Pandora's Box's lid wide open.

"There's a book in my chair," he whispered. "Take it and open it to page two hundred and eighty four."

Tubbo listened and after a questioning stare, obeyed. He reached behind them, grabbed "Poisoned Growths Of The Two Dimensions" and flipped it open to the correct page.

"Now what?" he asked.

Tommy couldn't help but shoot him a side-eyed glance. "What do you think?"

"Warped thallium," Tubbo read aloud, then frowned. "Why do I know that name?"

"Because we've used it before, back in L'Manberg," Tommy replied. "When Wilbur wanted to start his potion empire, he diluted the resin. He said it wouldn't have been very business-savvy if our customers died, now would it? A little can be great in a number of different potions, but too much can be deadly. It can sometimes take weeks after the dosage for it to kill, but it *will* kill eventually."

Tubbo scrunched up his face in apprehension. "I recall, kind of. Why are you showing me this?"

Tommy laughed a forced laugh. He wondered how he could somehow explain the situation without fucking up monumentally. Not that he already hadn't anyway.

"I may have let all that information slip to Dream during my exile. We were exploring a Warped Forest in the Nether and he jokingly wondered if the mushrooms were edible in an omelette. I had to tell him all about it because I thought he was my friend, and I didn't want him to do something dumb like choke himself. On second thought, I should have just let the bastard eat them. That would have saved us a lot of trouble."

"Why are you showing me this, Tommy?" Tubbo's voice hitched.

"I think that's what fucked up my leg. The burning, the paralysis, the excruciatingly long period of agony..." He listed them all off on his fingers one by one. "It all checks out."

Tubbo spluttered. "That's impossible, the healers would have seen—"

"Not if they didn't know it was there in the first place," Tommy interrupted. He knew sounded distant, very distant. A million miles away, even. He didn't sound like himself. "Warped thallium is colourless and odourless. They would have had no way to know. Now it's too late."

"Too late?" A hand grabbed his arm and held on tightly. "Too late for what?"

"I think the arrow Dream shot me with was poisoned."

Tubbo shook him violently. "Tommy, what are you saying?"

"I think I'm dying."

He laughed aloud, finally letting the fucking shit of it all sink in. He kept his gaze trained on the thin line where the dark landscape met the dark sky.

Everything was still pitch black, and it would stay that way for a while yet. Maybe even for the rest of his life.

He doubted that he was even going to see the morning.

Chapter Eighty-Three: Fateful

There were moments in life that were drowned in silence, a silence that couldn't be filled by words. The minute that followed Tommy's sudden, nonchalant revelation was one of those.

Tubbo didn't know what else to say or do except stare. At one point, he smiled.

Tommy liked playing jokes on people. That was all this was, a joke. He was playing a joke. He had to be playing a joke.

"You're a dick," the ram chuckled, punching the boy's arm.

Immediately, Tommy's face contorted and he yanked himself away, clutching his bicep. "Fucking hell," he cursed, glaring at his attacker.

Tubbo hadn't hit him that hard. That was when he truly knew something was wrong. Something strange was definitely afoot, but that still didn't mean anything. It didn't mean that Tommy was dying.

"Listen, have you looked through all the possibilities?" Tubbo checked, flipping open the book again and starting right from page one. "You can't just stop at the first one that looks familiar and is labeled as lethal."

"Tubbo—"

"Look, a cave spider bite for example. Painful, but not deadly. Have you been in any caves recently?"

His hands were trembling and his eyes were welling up with frustrated tears. It was ridiculously hard to turn the pages and read the lines.

"Tubbo..."

"Or maybe the arrow was only tipped with some poison ivy. Again, it's not deadly in small doses, just annoying—"

"It burns."

"Well, that certainly doesn't narrow it down."

"No, Tubbo," Tommy said with a firm tone. "It *burns*."

And the ram finally looked up at him. Tommy's gaze was focused on his useless legs. He started to trail his index finger from his wound and up his whole body.

"It started with my feet," he whispered. His hand kept moving as he talked, like it was following the twisting roads on a map. "Then, it fucked them up and kept climbing. I think my arms will be the next ones to go, and maybe my head."

He finally lay a hand on his chest and breathed in deeply.

"And I think it'll finish me off by burning away a good chunk of my heart." He laughed half-heartedly. "People weren't kidding when they said that things like power can corrupt you like a poison. They were pretty spot on with the feeling."

His other hand joined his own and before long, Tommy was hunched over with his arms around himself. He didn't cry, but his scrunched up face and shaking shoulders told the world that he was about to.

He wanted to be loved. He wanted to be hugged.

Tubbo didn't dare touch him.

The mere thought of doing so, as much as it hurt him not to, made him sick. He couldn't hug Tommy. He couldn't hug a straight up *liar*.

"You're not fucking dying," he bit out, surprised by the growl that came with it.

"Tubbo—"

"You're *not* fucking dying!"

He leapt up from the bench and away from his friend, who gazed sorrowfully at him with the waterworks so close to spilling over.

Tubbo let out a breathless laugh of disbelief. To his own ears, he sounded crazed. Insane. Drunk on something or other. Angry. Very angry. Close to snapping. He sounded like his father, Schlatt.

"You're not dying, you're just delusional!"

He was most definitely trying to persuade himself more than Tommy. He stumbled backwards.

"Tubbo, I'm serious," Tommy murmured in a quiet, hushed voice.

"That's what they all say. Listen, I'm going to get someone who can drill some sense into you."

Tommy's eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare, bitch."

Tubbo matched his expression. "Oh, I will most certainly dare, *bitch*."

Before Tommy could stop him in any way, shape or form, he bolted.

Tubbo couldn't feel anything at all, save for the blood rushing into his ears and the first few itches of a panic attack starting to well up in his chest.

Tommy wasn't dying.

Tommy was just delusional.

Tommy isn't dying.

He'd prove it.

He burst back into the White Mansion. The door banged and creaked loudly on their hinges, and it was a miracle that he hadn't woken the whole place up. He couldn't care less if he did.

He needed someone, anyone.

The first person he woke up was Ranboo.

"Get up, get dressed and get to the door," he ordered, nevertheless making sure to lower his voice so as to not wake Michael.

The hybrid blinked at him, sleepy and visibly confused out of his mind. "I... what?"

"Just do it."

"It's, like, three in the morning—"

"It's Tommy, Boo. Something's wrong."

"Wrong? In what way?"

"Just get dressed."

"Tubbo, why—"

The ram had to practically yank his lanky form out and shoved him towards their overnight packs. "Just do it."

He didn't even double check to see if Ranboo was listening to him and rushed to his next destination.

He burst into the next bedroom over and yelled at the top of his lungs, "Sam!"

"Tubbo, what's going on?"

Sam stared at him through bleary eyes, running a hand over his brow. The dull, grey light of the hallways stretched over the covers like the blade of a sword. To his credit, he had snapped up almost immediately at the call, but his movements were still sluggish and sleepy. He wasn't moving fast enough, *for fuck's sake!*

"There's something wrong with Tommy," the ram spluttered, out of breath. His throat kept tightening and he was on the verge of tears.

At the mention of the boy's name, Sam suddenly became more awake than ever.

"Where is he?" he asked, climbing out from beneath the covers.

Puffy stirred beside him. "Tubbo? Sam? What's going on?"

Neither of them answered her.

"He's at the bench," Tubbo said.

"The bench?" Sam repeated, taken aback. "In the middle of the night? What's—"

"I can't explain here, just please!" Tubbo's tears were already beginning to fall, no matter how hard he tried to stop them. "You need to come."

"Sam?"

"Stay here. I'll take care of it." Sam squeezed Puffy's hand, then stood up and grabbed a shirt, his cloak and his trident. "I'll be there in a moment," he promised Tubbo.

As he got dressed, Tubbo ran over to his mother's bedside and gently butted his head against hers.

"Tubbo," she asked again, "what's going on?"

"Everything's fine," the ram lied, biting the inside of his cheek. He gave her a hug. "It's probably nothing."

"Is Tommy alright?"

He paused. "I don't know..."

He didn't want to see the churning seas of worry in her eyes and turned away. He ran out of the bedroom, Sam on his heels. Ranboo was anxiously waiting for them by the front door and followed them closely as they rushed off into the night.

Every step Tubbo took felt like wasted time. They didn't have much of it, and every second where Tommy wasn't in his sight was a second that brought along even more thoughts of the thousands of potential tragic scenarios that could have occurred. Maybe Dream wasn't really dead and had come back to cut the boy's throat. Maybe he had thrown himself off the edge of the cliff. Maybe he had simply succumbed to the poison already.

The last, oddly enough, was the only one that Tubbo couldn't wrap his head around.

Thankfully though, when they reached the plateau, Tommy was still alive and well – well enough at least to be painstakingly trying to hook up Mellohi to the jukebox. He was visibly weak and shaking, but he was beyond determined as shown by his furrowed brow and the tongue caught between his teeth. Eventually, he managed to drop the needle on the vinyl surface, and the deep, ominous music started to play. He sighed and leaned back.

Tubbo and his companions sprinted to his side and immediately began to bombard him with questions.

"Tommy!" Ranboo shook his shoulder. "What happened?"

"Are you alright?" Sam sat beside him and made the boy look at him. His tone and movements were a little brash and stern, but he was clearly deeply worried.

Tommy did not give them the satisfaction of a reply. He glared at Tubbo, who shuffled away nervously.

"I told you not to get anyone," the boy reminded him with a bitter tone.

He had, but Tubbo had been too frantic to care. Even if Tommy didn't need anyone, Tubbo did, and he wasn't going to apologize for that.

"Yeah, I did bring someone," the ram replied, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Two someones, in fact."

"Bitch."

"Tommy, look at me," Sam ordered again, snapping his fingers in front of his face.

Tommy turned to glare at him. "I'm not your dog," he snapped.

"No, but you're my son. I love you. When Tubbo came to get us, practically screaming about you being in danger, I was sick with worry."

Tubbo saw Tommy soften a little, and he hunched his shoulders a little. "Sorry..."

Sam's stern demeanour changed as well. "It's alright, Toms, but I think we're all entitled to some sort of explanation, right?" He smiled. He was clearly trying to keep his tone light. "Don't you think?"

Tommy gave him a lopsided, half-hearted grin in response. "Yeah, maybe. You're not going to like it, though. That's why I didn't want Tubbo to go get anyone."

"It's not a question of whether we'll like it or not, but if you tell us the truth."

"The truth? Sam, the truth is I'm dying."

Tommy had always been pretty blunt in most situations, which had definitely worked to his advantage in the past – not tonight.

The way he calmly told his father that he was going to pass away – no euphemisms in sight to dull the blow – made Tubbo's gut churn and his breath escape his body, as if someone had punched him in the chest.

But Sam, remarkably, stayed calm and collected. "Why do you think that?"

"I don't *think* I'm going to die, Sam. I *know* it. The arrow Dream shot me with was poisoned with warped thallium. That's why I've been confined to a dumb fucking chair, and why my whole body burns like hell. I can't feel anything anymore."

Sam took and squeezed his hand. "Can you feel that?"

And Tommy shook his head.

Again, Sam's expression changed. "You're not dying, Tommy," he whispered, more to himself than anything. "You can't be dying..."

Tommy gave him a teary smile. "I'm not going to see the sunrise."

"We'll find a healer," Sam promised, his voice quaking and hollow. He didn't get up. He didn't seem to want to let go of his boy, even to save him. "Everything will be alright."

"It won't. It's too late." Tommy started to cry. "It's all my fault, I should have seen the signs sooner, and maybe I could have done something..."

"No, I should have put my foot down," Sam replied in a heartbeat, joining the boy with tears of his own. "I should have stopped you from fighting in that stupid war. I should have— Oh gods, I led you to your death again..."

"Dad, it's not your fault. It was never your fault."

"It was never yours either, and don't you dare think that for a second."

Sam's free hand came to cup his cheek and he forced out a smile, but Tubbo knew. He knew that he was close to buckling completely.

The ram kept admiring his strength. Even in the face of being told that his son was going to die in the next few hours, Sam was trying desperately to hold himself together. Even in such a terrible moment, he was trying to stay calm for all their sakes.

"You know, I thought you were a bit of a prick when I first met you," Tommy said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, but then I realized that you were actually just trying to help me. I think I owe you an overdue apology for that."

"Heh, maybe..."

"Do you remember the festival?" Tommy suddenly asked.

Sam nodded and pressed his forehead against the boy's. "Of course I do."

"That was fun. I always thought that we could maybe go to another one, preferably one where Tubbo doesn't die."

This time, it was the ram's turn to grin a little, and Tommy flashed him a smile.

"I'm still curious to know how those redstone machines of yours worked," he said, turning his attention back to Sam.

"You got bored with my explanation after five minutes."

"Well excuse me for not being a nerd like you! You were basically speaking a different language."

"Apology accepted," Sam teased. He moved from the bench to the grassy ground in front of Tommy, still holding his hand. "Does it hurt?"

He made a face. "A little, and all over. I can still feel the burning."

Sam pressed his lips to the boy's knuckles. "I don't want you to go but if you must, don't suffer for our sake. You've done so much for so many people. You're a hero in so many hearts."

"And like Techno said, the heroes never get happy endings. He's gonna shit himself when he finds out that for once, he was right. Tonight's the night that Theseus proves that fucker right." He made another face, more of disgust than pain. "And now I've just made myself unbearably sad again. That pig better not steal the spotlight from me."

"We'll make sure he won't."

"And even if he does, I can gloat as well. I'll be with Phil again, and he won't."

In any other situation, that comment would have been unbelievably shocking and insensitive, but Tubbo knew that Tommy's intentions were far from malicious.

The boy's face fell again. "Do you think I'll see Phil?"

No one could give him an honest answer.

"I hope so," he continued, seemingly oblivious to their silence. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

"He did love you, Tommy. I hope you know that."

Ranboo hadn't spoken up in ages but now he had, most of everyone's attention shifted to him. Tommy may have perhaps been deteriorating right in front of their very eyes, but Ranboo was undoubtedly the most frail. A simple gust of wind could have knocked him over, and his newly falling tears continued to dig into their scarred tracks.

Tommy smiled up at him. "Hey, Ender Boy, do you still have your journal on you?"

Ranboo took it out of his pocket. "Always," he replied.

Tommy hummed in approval. "I want you to make a list," he said, and waited until the hybrid had grabbed his pen, briefly sharing a look with Tubbo. "Honestly, I never thought of making something sappy like a bucket list, and now it's kind of too late to complete one. So, I want you to complete one for me."

"I, uh, sure."

"Great. First off, I want to go hunting. I've never done that before and people say it's a lot of fun. Second, I've always wanted to go and see another Championship, and of course root for the Red Rabbits. They're the best team no matter who ends up getting randomly selected in it."

"Hunting... Championship..." Ranboo wrote down diligently.

"Third of all, I want you to pie Bad and Techno in the face. I don't care how, I don't care when, I just want you to do it *well*."

Again, Tubbo smiled. It only brightened when Ranboo opened his mouth to question the demand, then thought better of it and jotted it down nevertheless.

"Fourth of all, I want you to take off your pants and go knock on Jack Manifold's—"

Ranboo's pen poised above the page, and he frowned. "Something's telling me that you're taking advantage of me," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Too bad you'll never know for sure," Tommy smirked, then cleared his throat again. "Fifth of all—"

"I hate to say this Tommy," Sam said, also grinning a little, "but I think you've tormented Ranboo enough."

"I just have two more requests," the boy argued. "They're serious ones, I promise."

Sam gave in with a dismissive wave.

"Fifth of all," Tommy resumed brightly, "I want you to run a marathon for me, from Kinoko to the Badlands. Run through every street and through every forest. Leave no stone unturned. If I wasn't in a wheelchair and about to die, I would have done that one

myself. And finally, I want you to make sure everyone always smiles and lives their lives to the fullest. I know I should have."

Ranboo placed a hand on his shoulder. "You did, more than any of us."

Tommy shrugged, or at least seemingly tried to. His shoulders barely rose. "I put you through hell, Ranboo, and I'm sorry for that. Dream might have left you alone if I didn't make you burn down George's house with me—"

"But then we wouldn't have become friends," the hybrid pointed out, bending down a little and nuzzling his cheek. "That alone means everything to me."

And for the first time since they became a trio, Tubbo didn't see Tommy push him away. He instead happily leaned into the touch, into the comfort of Ranboo's leathery skin.

He closed his eyes too and when he opened them again, they were focused on Tubbo. "Hey, Bee Boy. Come a little closer."

The ram didn't waste a second and practically threw himself into Tommy's lap and squeezed him tightly.

"Fucking hell, Tubbo! Shit's already eating me alive and you decide to suffocate me while you're at it!"

"I don't want you to die," Tubbo pleaded, now that he knew for certain that it was all true. "Please don't die..."

He couldn't get a hug back, but he didn't need one. Hearing his best friend simply breathing in his ear was more than enough. It was a sign that he was still here for a little while more.

"Hate to break it to you, but I don't have much of a choice."

"I would do anything to bring you back."

"Yeah, I know, but sometimes the road comes to an end and there's nothing we can do anymore. The Revival Book is gone. This is checkmate."

Tommy was good at using Tubbo's own words against him. Checkmate was the term he had used when Dream had almost tried to kill him in his secret bunker, so long ago now. Now it was being used again in a similar situation – only this time, no rescue party no matter how big or loyal could ever save Tommy.

This was Tommy's checkmate, and his death would be Dream's final victory.

"Hey, c'mon Tubbo, it's alright."

He hadn't realized that he had started to full on sob until the wet spot on Tommy's shirt grew.

"Look at me."

Tubbo did. Tommy's lively blue eyes stared back, although now they were far more faded. The life in them was disappearing just as swiftly as it was from the rest of his body.

"You have been and always will be my best friend. If you ever think of me, I don't want you to remember this moment. I want you to remember the good times."

Tubbo sniffed. "Our first home."

"The good times with Wilbur," Tommy added with a wide grin.

"L'Manberg's glory days."

"The Camarvan."

"Nikki teaching us to swim."

"Playing tricks on Fundy."

"When we gained our independence."

"When we won against Schlatt's tyranny."

"When you forgave me."

"When you kept the discs safe."

"Gogy's STDs."

"When we didn't start the fire."

"I like da bee."

"That safety-hazard of a treehouse."

"I bet you Nook's still furious with us about that."

They laughed softly at their own inside jokes. Tubbo knew no one else would get them, and that was fine by them. They were their own little gems in their own treasure chest that no one would ever get their hands on.

Tubbo swallowed hard. "I'll remember," he promised.

Tommy nodded. "I know you will." He turned his head back towards the darkened horizon and sighed impatiently. "I wish the sun would hurry up and give me my well deserved sunrise."

Tubbo silently pleaded for it to stay down a little longer. The sooner it rose, the less time Tommy would have to live. The mindless comment about him not going to see the morning seemed far more like a promise now.

Tubbo cuddled up close to Tommy. Ranboo's hand stayed on his other shoulder. Sam was still kneeling in front of them all.

"I lost you once," Sam whispered. "Losing you again might very well kill me."

"Well in that case," Tommy breathed out, "we'll have the best double funeral the SMP has ever known."

Despite everything, that cracked everyone up a little.

"But you can't die," continued Tommy. "You've got families and people who need you."

"So do you," Tubbo butted in.

His heart broke when his best friend chuckled and weakly shook his head.

"It's not the same. You have loved ones who depend on you, and I depend on loved ones. One's more important than the other."

"It's not," Ranboo piped up. "Tommy, we all depend on you to—"

"Make a mess? Bitch and cry? Burden you all down with a wheelchair?" He laughed again. "Nah, you don't depend on me."

"It's not a matter of if we depend on you," Sam whispered. "We love you, Toms. We love you, and that is worth everything."

Tubbo could tell that he meant every word and in an instant, all his remaining suspicions about Sam disappeared. Sam was kind, he was good, he was loving, and he wouldn't dare hurt anyone he loved. He loved Tubbo, Ranboo, Michael, Michelle, Puffy and most importantly, he loved Tommy. That was the only love that mattered then.

Tommy was loved.

"Tommy, there's still time," Tubbo pressed him. "We could at least try to find someone—"

"No, don't leave me." Tommy was unable to move his arms or legs, but his voice still worked. "I want you to stay, all of you. Please, stay. At least until dawn breaks."

Until he was gone, whenever that time may have been.

His plea was the rope that tied them by his side and forced acceptance down their throats. It was the last sign that fighting anymore was fruitless, and now he simply wanted to be loved.

So loved him they did, right until the bitter end.

There was no way to know when exactly Tommy had breathed his last. There was nothing spectacular about his passing – it was a small, subtle moment that no one could pinpoint if they tried.

One moment, his heart had been beating, and the next it was silent.

One moment he was there, the next he was gone.

Tubbo only turned to look at his best friend when the sky awoke with a rainbow of warm, pastel light.

"It's our sunrise," he whispered, knowing full well that it was too late. It was over.

Ranboo was the next to move. "Tommy...?" he called gently, his hand tightening around his shoulder. When he got no response, he tried to get one from the others. "Please, he can't be..."

But he was.

Sam, still kneeling down on the now dew-covered grass, let his head hang lower. His shoulders started to shake with a gradual fit of sobs, and he lovingly kissed the cold, dead hand in-between his own.

Not knowing where else to go, who to tell yet, they carried him solemnly back to the White Mansion, where their disappearance hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Fucking hell, we thought you had been kidnapped—" Skeppy started to say as he rushed out of the front door.

He stopped once he finally saw the body that Sam carried in his arms. Frantic, he disappeared back inside and yelled something. The rest of the Badlands burst outside soon after. Bad, Ant and Velvet froze to the spot on the front steps. Puffy on the other hand bolted straight past them and towards the body.

"Tommy?" she cried, holding the boy's limp hand. "He's not... He can't..."

Sam dropped to his knees.

Puffy fell beside him, terribly trembling hands trying frantically to waken the corpse, somehow. She brushed his hair, stroked his cheek, spoke to him in furtive whispers, and even leaned down to give his frozen cheek a kiss.

When none of that worked, she collapsed completely with a wail of despair. No one could ever understand the grief of a parent forced to bury their own child, but the sheer, heart wrenching power of the scream was enough to imagine. It practically tore the world apart.

That was the last straw.

Tubbo ran straight into his mother's arms and sobbed his heart out, clinging to her like a small child. He didn't know what else to do.

His best friend, his brother, was gone.

He felt lost, completely and utterly lost, and he was just desperate to get found. The only person who really could was now a dead body at his feet, this time with no hope of revival.

Tommy was dead for good, and the thought that he didn't even get a fair chance to fight back was what took Tubbo out completely.

If Tubbo didn't know better, he would have said that Fate was mocking them. Exactly one year after the first funeral, a second one was held. Both had been for Tommy. This time around, however, it took place in the ruins of the old imposing watchtower that overlooked L'Manberg, not a forgotten hill in the middle of a windy moor, and the turnout was much, much bigger.

This time as well, Tubbo attended.

Strangers and old comrades alike gathered around the burial ground, all of them paying their respects to a young boy they didn't even know that well. They were the ones that could actually look at the coffin as it was being lowered.

Tommy's true loved ones, his friends and family, all looked the other way. Even the four who carried and laid the coffin to rest didn't dare look down into the hole.

Ant and Sapnap moved away immediately after with their heads bowed. Sam turned his back completely to hold Puffy tightly and bury his face in her curls.

Even Technoblade diverted his gaze, this time to the sky. A cold, dark look of apprehension was laid like a shroud upon his features, as if he was silently cursing whichever god was responsible for the young one's death. He moved away like a bulking shadow of mourning, and made his way to the back of the crowd. After that, the ram didn't see him for the rest of the funeral.

The hole was filled in soon after by a couple of designated strangers, and the crowd started to disperse. Many left, but some still stayed. Tubbo could recognize a few old faces from L'Manberg among them, and he had to admit that it did warm his heart.

Finally, as the last shovelful of earth was thrown on top of the burial ground, a strange sensation was released into the air. Everyone stood once more in complete silence. This time, it was for something other than Tommy. Everyone took a brief moment to reflect, and finally take note of their battered and exhausted bodies.

A year. Such a short stretch of time, and yet with everything that had happened, it felt like centuries had dragged on.

It was a year that had started and ended with a funeral, with so much happiness, despair, love, heartbreak, hope, heaven and hell crammed in for good measure.

It was insane, when one took the time to think about it – and Tubbo did. He thought about it a little too long, perhaps, and he did the unthinkable. He cracked a smile over

his best friend's grave. He began to laugh, laugh in disbelief, in fatigue, in happiness, and at the ridiculousness of everything that had happened and was happening.

He laughed at life, at death, and at all in-between.

At first, the rest of the solemn gathering shot him shocked looks, until his chuckles began to sink into everyone's soul, until they became unbearably infectious.

Before long, everyone's faces, soaked with hot tears, had changed into a cacophony of laughs, rising up into the spiralling ruins of the tower above.

Tubbo was perhaps the loudest of them all, and he rejoiced in it. After all, Tommy was never really a sappy kind of guy. He'd be happy that his funeral ended in hysterical laughter.

Maybe he was even laughing with them in his afterlife, who was to say. No one knew, and no one would ever know. There was only one thing that they were certain of in the end.

If anyone was going to have the last laugh, they all made sure that it wasn't going to be Dream.

Chapter Eighty-Four: Goodbyes

It was a bright, welcoming morning in the SMP. Most of them usually were now that the drums of war of prior years had been silenced for good. Things had well and truly fallen back into place. Some things had changed, others hadn't.

Snowchester's gentle snowfall was one of them. It was still a pure, glimmering white, still gently caressed the window panes, and still fell all year round with scarcely any interruptions.

It was in front of one of these windows that an enderman hybrid sat. Tall and lanky, the writing desk still seemed comically small underneath him, but he didn't have the heart to replace it. He had grown attached to the way it was, simply because he had allowed himself to – now, you could afford to care for something with no strings attached.

He was still stuck at an awkward age where he was too old to be called a child, and yet still too goofy and naive from time to time to be known as a responsible adult. His first step into his twenties only served to confuse his already muddled, developing mind just a smidgen more.

A journal was opened up in front of him over the rest of the papers strewn across the slightly slanted surface. Eret would probably have a few things to say about smothering the precious museum plans with unrelated work, but the hybrid was pretty sure that the monarch could give him a break.

His pointed ear twitched, and bright eyes smiled at the prospect of shutting down royalty with witty humour too amusing to ignore. Perhaps he could persuade Techno to be in attendance when it happened. He was sure that his old, anarchist mentor would have a good snicker over it.

But he could mull over that idea for a one-off comedy skit later. Right now, he had something else on his fleeting mind, and had to get it down in ink before he forgot.

He dipped his quill in the inkwell and turned to a new page. He began to write.

I dreamed about Tommy last night. It was strange, but comforting in a way.

Has it really been two years already? I still can't really let that sink in properly. So much has changed, and yet sometimes I think that nothing has at all either. I still feel the same. I still look the same.

Anyways, he flipped me off, which I think is only fitting for him. I think Phil was there too, in the distance. They looked happy.

He lifted his eyes to the single scrap of paper nailed to the wall over his workspace. The list from many memory books ago was always there, a constant reminder of something, or rather someone he still missed every day. All the demands on the post-death bucket list had been met, even the most embarrassing ones, but there was always one that was still ongoing.

6. Make sure everyone always smiles and lives their lives to the fullest

"I'm always trying, Tommy," he whispered with a smile, "I'm always trying..."

"Ranboo? What are you still doing here?"

The hybrid turned away from the list and towards the figure leaning against the door.

Tubbo, now a fully grown, strapping ram of twenty as well, hadn't changed a bit. He was still that cocky, bright little spark Ranboo loved so much, even down to the childlike, giddy way his hooves would dance impatiently across the floor.

"Just writing," the hybrid hummed.

"Well stop it! Have you forgotten what's happening in about—" He checked his pocket watch. "—twenty minutes?"

Ranboo furrowed his brow. "Uh... maybe?"

He went to look through the pages of his memory book, but Tubbo was quicker. He snapped it shut and threw a cloak around the hybrid's shoulders then dragged him from his seat.

"The boat!" he cried. "It's leaving soon and we're definitely not going to miss the send-off!"

The boat. The send-off.

Of course.

In twenty minutes.

Oh fuck.

They both sprinted out of the door as fast as their legs would carry them.

The new Overworld bridge linking Snowchester to the Badlands was bustling, which really was not ideal at the present moment. Ranboo and Tubbo had to dodge and weave through people, carts and mounts as they went. Further out into the sea water channel between the two realms, the tundra snowfall cleared up into the mellow, early summer's warmth of the Badlands' moorland and bordering coastline.

In his frantic race, Ranboo caught glimpses of Pandora's Vault in the distance, and the harbour town facing it on the mainland. To think that not so long ago, that same strip of beach was being used to siege the prison.

He could also see the tips of a mast peek out over the houses, assuring him that they were not too late.

"Leader of Snowchester and King Eret's favourite, coming through!" Tubbo yelled at the top of his lungs, practically barreling through the last few people before reaching the end of the bridge.

Ranboo sheepishly followed behind, offering apologies when he could before rejoining Tubbo's side as they dashed towards the harbour.

"I'm not Eret's favourite," he laughed as they finally set foot on the cobbled streets.

"Ah, Ranboo! My favourite advisor!"

Tubbo smirked as they slowed to a halt. "You were saying?"

King Eret strode towards them with a beaming smile. "Going to watch the send-off?"

Ranboo immediately snapped to attention and bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty—"

"Eret, remember?"

The hybrid gingerly cleared his throat and rose again. "Eret," he repeated, still dipping into a respectful and apologetic bow. "I'll get the hang of it, I promise."

"I don't doubt it," the king assured him with the patience and kindness Ranboo had always admired him for.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye?" he asked him.

"I already did, but now duty calls. Anyway, I feel like it isn't exactly my place to intrude here." He shrugged. "This is the Badlands' moment—"

"And mine too," Tubbo interjected. "She is my mum, after all."

"Of course." The two leaders greeted each other warmly, then Eret looked back at his advisor. "Have you looked over the plans a little?"

Immediately, Ranboo geared his brain into business mode. "I've decided that instead of another level above ground, we should maybe think about a basement. You see, I've noticed—"

"Whoah there, hold your horses!" King Eret chuckled. "You can tell me the details tomorrow, alright? Make the most of the rest of today."

The hybrid knew exactly what he meant, and his heart stung a little again. "Yeah, of course."

It still ached a little when they parted ways, and especially when the hustle and bustle of the pier got closer and closer.

"You good?" Tubbo asked him, squeezing his hand.

"My stomach hurts," Ranboo admitted, holding a hand to it and gripping it through his shirt. "Is saying goodbye always this hard?"

"I guess it's just different," replied Tubbo, momentarily vanishing behind his thoughts.

Tommy. He was thinking of Tommy. In moments of bittersweet sorrow like this, he always did, and Ranboo knew that.

"At least it's not a death," the hybrid reminded him, trying to lighten things up a little. It barely worked.

"Yeah, but it's just as painful. At least Tommy stayed here during and after the fact. Today's going to be a bit harder."

Ranboo had to reluctantly agree with him on that point, and the smile he plastered on his face as they joined the gathering at the edge of the water was forced at best.

"—and finally, Water Resistance."

Puffy pat one of the heavy crates. "Check. There are enough potions in here to last for months, and we've got the ingredients to make many more."

Sam ticked off the last box. "Well then, Michelle's going to be fine."

He smiled at the little piglin, who had only joined their side after bidding a final, teary goodbye to Michael. She didn't say anything back.

Michelle had grown up far too fast to both Sam's surprise and despair. She didn't constantly and naively idolize her father anymore. Instead, she learned about disappointment and heartbreak, two painful emotions she carried with her that day.

She shot him a quick look and mumbled something incomprehensible – a barely audible goodbye. She trudged away towards the gangplank without a look back.

Sam had never thought that the goodbyes could be more saddening, until his own daughter proved him wrong.

"I thought she'd be so excited to finally sail with me," Puffy said in a hushed voice. "She always wanted to go, but now it seems like she doesn't. I can't understand it."

Yes, denial. Denial was good, great even.

"Neither do I," Sam sighed. He handed her back the list. "Seems you have everything."

She took it from him with a rigid arm. "Seems like I do. Thanks for helping." Her tone was bitter.

In response, he let out a small hum, lips pursed.

There was a moment, a tense pause where neither of them said a word.

"I should go and say goodbye to everyone."

"Yeah, maybe you should."

With hesitant steps, she moved through the crowd of gathered friends and began to deal out her final words and hugs. He could hear her fondly cooing over Tubbo and sharing a few last words of comfort with Ranboo. Sam closed his eyes and tried to tune her out.

The two years that had followed Dream's defeat had been happy for the most part. Of course, there had been a few hiccups here and there.

Fran died peacefully in her sleep three months prior. She was a good dog, but an old one that had lived longer than anyone had expected. After all, she had been there from

the very beginning of the SMP, and the new, peaceful life let her bones catch up with her. At least she had had a happy life, and she was loved.

Sam Nook had passed on as well, standing guard over Tommy's grave until a particularly cold winter took its toll. He was buried next to him, ever loyal and loving.

Both deaths had hit Sam hard. They were companions he had hand reared from puppy and kit, and he missed them dearly.

But perhaps the thing that hit him the most had come to be in the last month or so, and within the boundaries of his family.

If anyone had decided to pry into Sam and Puffy's relationship in recent times, they would have been met with awkward smiles and even more awkward quick changes of the subject. It was almost as if mentioning them and what they had was some sort of superstitious claptrap neither of them could shake. When one entered the room, the other would be suddenly pressed to leave. They didn't talk to each other outside of civil questions and replies about the bare necessities.

Rumours began to run around that Sam and Puffy both dispelled separately, but the lack of evidence to back their reassurance up still deeply puzzled all those who heard them out.

The only thing that they still shared was a bed at night. It seemed to be the only place that their romance still remained, under the cover of darkness.

However, the love wasn't gone, far from it. It never slipped away, not even for a moment. The blazing argument they had was about their love, and how much they adored each other. It was there in the good and the bad, in the confessions and confrontations. It was there no matter what. Their feelings for each other hadn't wavered and only became stronger – and perhaps that was part of the problem.

The adoration and devotion Sam felt so strongly was what made him put Puffy's happiness a thousand levels above his own, even if that meant he'd drag around a heavy, broken heart for the rest of his life. Even if that meant that he was left behind while she embarked on new adventures.

That same adoration and devotion was what had pushed Puffy to relentlessly try and fight him on it, to beg him to come with her and when that failed, to assure him that she didn't want to leave in the first place.

The latter was a lie, and the former was the subject of many tears.

The resolution to that fight was eventually found weeks after, but it was one that hurt deeply no matter what. Even the beautiful new ship that was built for her left a cavity within them both. It was salt shoved mercilessly into the shared wound of two, beating hearts.

Since then, they both restrained themselves, acting as acquaintances more than friends, or even lovers. The only slip up was the previous night, where they both caved in and held each other silently until the sun came up.

If that was how it all ended, with a final caress at sunrise, Sam was certain that he'd never open his heart to anyone ever again.

She was facing him again, this time to bestow her final goodbye.

"Sam, are you sure about this?"

"We both knew that you were never meant to stay here," he chuckled dryly, his voice cracking.

"But falling for you wasn't a part of that plan," Puffy whispered back.

He looked at her.

She looked at him.

And then, their self-restraint snapped completely.

Captain Puffy threw herself into Sam's arms, who squeezed her as tightly as he could. He buried his face into her shoulder and his trembling hand in her hair, keeping her close for a moment longer. A moment he wanted to last for his final lifetime, and beyond.

"I'll write to you every day, even if you never get the letters," he promised, slurring his own words. "I'll pray, I'll beg the gods, I'll sell my soul if I have to just to see you again."

"I'll be back in three months," Puffy said with a small, unconvinced laugh that sounded like a double-edged sword.

They both knew that three months could mean three years, three decades even. One or both could die before they'd ever set eyes on each other again. They could, and likely would, be parted forever.

The sea. At the heart of it all, the sea was to blame. Puffy had always belonged to it, and not even their love could erase that fact. So Sam had accepted it. It was hard, but he had, eventually.

She could return to the sea, and he could stay in the Badlands, on land. He could bury himself in the bowels of the earth, within the glittering depths of a mine or the musty, redstone-filled air of a workshop.

He'd be alright. He *had* to be alright.

"I want to kiss you," Puffy pleaded.

Sam shook his head. "It'll just make it all that much harder."

Tears pricked the corners of his eyes and he pushed her away. The weight on his shoulders was crushing him.

She hung on to his sleeves. "Please—"

"Please, darling, you need to leave now, or you never will."

There was a moment, the time of a single heartbeat, where she looked like she might cave in and stay. That she might disregard the risks and their long, winding argument of previous weeks and embrace him for the last time, binding them together forever.

Instead, she finally let go of him, for the first time in years. She took a step back and gave him a flourished reverence that could have swept away every star in the heavens. When she rose again, she didn't look at him, and pulled her tricorn further over her eyes. The last image of Puffy that Sam would have was her blocking him from view.

It hurt more than the prospect of her leaving in the first place.

She finally tore herself away for good. Her footsteps faded towards the galleon, and it was over. The chapter was finished – or so he thought.

Other footsteps, this time heavy and lumbering, approached him from behind. Sam felt someone else join his side.

"You're being an idiot, Sam."

Sam hadn't heard Techno's voice in a while, but it was certainly welcome. It even managed to coax out a small smile.

"Probably," he admitted.

He took a shaky breath and exhaled sharply. He cleared his throat and turned around, preparing to walk away. He couldn't bear to watch as the love of his life took her last step off the SMP's land. He knew for a fact that she wasn't coming back, no matter how strongly she felt for those she left behind.

Puffy had washed up on the shores and as a favourable tide rolled back in a more peaceful time, she was leaving them. They all knew that her place among them had been temporary. No lie could ever dispute that, even if it would have made the truth easier to bear.

A large and heavy hand stopped him from escaping. "Why are you staying exactly?"

"I have a duty, Techno, to the Badlands but also—"

"I think we both know that your misplaced sense of duty has always been your downfall in one way or another."

The days of the Warden locked within the confines of Pandora's Vault were so ridiculously far away by now. As time had dragged on, Sam had even allowed himself to laugh about it all – mostly at his own stupidity and stubbornness, if he had to be honest. He even allowed himself a half-hearted chuckle then.

"Remember what I told you at the masquerade?" Techno asked him, his hand still on his shoulder.

Sam decided to humour his captor, and lent a curious ear. "Vaguely."

The Red Banquet was more of a blur now in his mind rather than an actual event. Some things, he remembered distinctly. Others, he wondered if he hadn't had a little too much to drink. Again, he and his friends had found that they could laugh at it a little too.

And with Puffy, of course, the events of that night had been much more to them than a simple scrap of history.

"I warned you about running out headfirst from the sidelines to get to her, and I told you that passion can be another word for suffering," Techno said, chiming familiar bells, "but I didn't tell you the whole thing. It'll only make you suffer if you *let* it get corrupted. If jealousy gets in there for example, like it nearly did at the Banquet, or regret and remorse worm their way in now."

Sam's previously assertive and sensible choice began to sway a little, like a ship sailing into rocky tides.

"You've got a big heart Sam – don't let hatred, fear or remorse lock it up for good. If you don't get on that ship and spend your last life with her, you'll regret it."

"I have everything I need here."

His own tone didn't convince him, and seemingly Techno neither. The piglin turned Sam until he faced him, and for the first time in ages, the man really looked at him.

Technoblade was growing old, and Sam could finally see that for himself. His eyes were faded and sunken in, and his fluffy fur had started to get more and more matted and unkempt, bleak in colour and cut through with streaks of grey. His scars no longer looked like proud trophies, but rather like saddening reminders of the horrors he had lived through. His tusks had never looked so scratched and damaged. He still smiled, although it was half-hearted at best and still shadowed by the tragedy of his best friend's death.

"You're not a prisoner of the SMP anymore," the aging warrior said, "you can afford to love and leave."

"So you're recommending that I should 'reject government, return to family'?"

The anarchist grunted out a chuckle. "Exactly. You've done so much already, more than anyone ever asked you to do. We all fought for this peace, and gods know you're allowed to take a little bit of it for yourself now. Your lives are short – live what's left of them for yourself, not for others."

Sam looked down at himself. He had nothing on him apart from his clothes, his cloak, his trident, and the many scars and memories he had amassed throughout the years. He also only had one last life, one last chance to live. In the long run, maybe that was all he really needed.

The scales suddenly tipped.

"I'm going," he blurted out, turning to the gathering behind him, mouth running faster than his mind.

"Going? Going where?" asked Ranboo, pricking his ears up.

"With Puffy. I'm leaving the SMP."

He was immediately met with startled looks and jaw dropped expressions. Where his heart sang, others gasped.

Bad was the first to confront him. "Sam, no! What about the Badlands? We need you!"

He smiled a little and shook his head. "You don't need me," he assured them. "You have each other, and gods know that you're better leaders than you think. Better than I could ever be on my own."

Sam crossed Antfrost's gaze. The cat seemed to be in pretty much the same state as Bad. His muzzle was twisted into a pretzel of worry, and he looked two seconds away from grovelling at Sam's feet.

Velvet on the other hand smiled back. "You're making the right choice." He linked his arm with Ant's and lay his head on his shoulder. "Trust me."

"Will we see you again?" Skeppy asked him, still stunned into shock.

"Who knows?" Sam said with a shrug. "Maybe you will, maybe you won't, but you'll be fine either way. You have each other, and you're all stronger and more loved by your people than you know."

The bittersweet truth of his words dulled the blow a little, and the sudden shock soon numbed into a quiet, saddened acceptance.

Bad gazed at him a little longer. "So, this really is goodbye, huh?"

"I... I guess it is. Take care of our nation for me."

The demon nodded. "We'll try."

"Wait, holy shit!" Tubbo suddenly exclaimed, butting his way through the Badlands and into the conversation. "You're serious about this? I thought you were kidding!"

"I'm not."

"Shit."

A tight coil formed in Sam's stomach. "Tubbo—"

"No, it's fine. You go." He kicked one of the cobbles under his feet and sniffed, averting his gaze. "I just thought that you'd stick around a little longer. Y'know, so I wouldn't lose my mum and dad again."

So many conflicting feelings rushed through Sam's blood and mind, and he didn't know where to start to unpack them.

He settled for placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You're not losing anyone," he assured him. "That's just how it goes. Stories start and end, people run in and out of your lives, but their impact will always stay. As long as we still love you, you'll never lose us."

"And do you love me?"

All at once, the two years that had passed vanished into thin air. Instead of a fully grown Tubbo, he was met with two young boys. One was still a strong, bold ram – although more in heart than physique at that point in the past – and the other was still alive and well again. In the question, Sam saw Tubbo and Tommy, his two sons. He answered them both.

"You don't even have to ask," he told him. He pulled Tubbo into a hug. "Your mother and I love you so much and that will never change, but you've grown up, Tubbo. You have your own life now." He pulled away and cupped his cheek. "We are so damn proud of you, and don't you ever forget that, son."

As the Badlands had done before him, Tubbo softened into a sense of acceptance. "You know what, Sam?" he smiled. "I think you've earned your balls."

The not-so-empty threat from ages ago once more resurfaced to the forefront of Sam's mind, and he couldn't help but laugh.

"Thank you, sir," he hummed. "They will be thankful to you forevermore."

"Your future children better be too. Be sure to tell them that their big bro Tubbo was the make and break of their existence."

"Oh, I'll tell them alright," he agreed, playing along. "Big Bro Tubbo will be their new god whether they like it or not."

"Good."

Sam hadn't even thought of the prospect of having kids in that way before, and hearing the idea – or rather, the strongly worded order – from Tubbo's mouth opened up another thought, another reason that pushed him to stay with the love of his life.

Tubbo's smile turned sad. "I'll miss you both. I keep thinking that we never had enough time together."

Sam felt the exact same way, and pulled him into his arms. "But at least we had a bit of it, and a little can go a long way."

"I'll keep the redstone up if you will."

"Of course! In fact, maybe we can build something together again one day. How does that sound?"

"Perfect. It sounds perfect."

He knew that both of them were tearing up, and he turned away to his other remaining friends before he let his emotions get the better of him – as if they hadn't done so already.

He wordlessly pulled Ranboo and Nikki into tight hugs too. That was the only goodbye they really needed to share. It said so much more than any bland words Sam could conjure up. The Syndicate would always prove to be their unbreakable alliance.

They would change with the coming years, but they would keep their sacred names up until the day they all finally died. Maybe even beyond that point.

"Tell Sapnap and George that I'll miss them."

Ranboo nodded. "I will," he vowed, taking out his memory book to jot down his request.

Sam smiled sadly. Ranboo hadn't changed a bit, and he hoped he never would.

While he was writing, Sam looked around for Technoblade. He was nowhere to be found. The piglin seemed to have simply vanished into thin air.

"He doesn't like goodbyes," Nikki reminded him, mirroring his deception.

Sam sighed. "Yeah, I know. I just wanted to thank him."

"Something tells me he already knows." She smiled up at him. "Take care of Puffy, won't you? She's truly one of a kind."

He held her hands and gave them a comforting squeeze. "Take care of each other as well. You're all remarkable."

He turned to look back at the ship, just in case Techno was there, somehow. All he saw instead was the last crate being hauled onboard. Two sailors high up on the deck strolled over to pull up the gangplank.

It was now or never.

Sam tore himself away from everything he had ever known and made a break for it. "Wait! Stop!"

The commotion he made caught everyone's attention, and he could feel hundreds of pairs of eyes on him as he charged across the pier and scrambled up the plank. He tripped a couple of times, but he was soon at the top and burst out onto the deck, to the surprise and confusion of the whole crew. He didn't even greet them, even as the trident on his back almost impaled their heads as he spun around in circles, looking desperately for one specific member of the crew.

He soon spotted her, and suddenly nothing else mattered anymore. He had eyes for the captain, and only the captain. He always had, and now he always would.

"Puffy!"

She turned around, just as she was about to disappear into her cabin. "Sam? What are you doing?"

"Don't leave—"

"We've talked about this..."

"—without me," he finished, breathing hard. "Don't leave without me."

He watched as her demeanour changed. "What? Sam, I don't know what you're—"

"I told you I've always wanted to travel again." He gestured to the galleon under their feet. "This is the biggest excuse I could find."

"Excuse?"

"No, that's not... I didn't mean—"

Fuck.

"Sam?"

"I just want to travel again," he finally managed to push out again, the little white lie tugging at his heartstrings.

"Is that the *only* reason you decided to almost break your neck on the plank on your way up here?"

She raised an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips. At first, he thought he had messed up again – and he may as well have thrown himself into the sea – until he saw her clearly trying to stifle a smile.

"No, it isn't," he said, a lot more confidently.

"I'm listening."

"Puffy, I love you. Since the first moment I laid eyes on you, I knew I'd love you. I didn't know when, I didn't know in what way, but I knew I would eventually."

The sorrow of their pained farewell cleared, giving up in favour of a softness unlike anything he had ever seen, and even a faint glimmer of hope that sparkled in her eyes. She said nothing, but he knew he had her full attention.

"I love you," he repeated. He was still breathless, but for another reason entirely than literally running for his life. "I could say that forever, and it would never be a lie. I did, I do, and I always will, even if I always knew that your biggest dream didn't include me in it."

"You make me sound like a monster," she scoffed.

"Oh, undoubtedly," he agreed with a laugh. "The prettiest, sassiest and most wonderful monster I've ever met."

He took a tentative step closer. She did too, and soon they were standing one in front of the other again, height difference and all. Now, Puffy had lazily crossed her arms in front of her chest, the hidden smile now becoming more apparent as the moments ticked on.

"I know that I'm part of the reason you stayed in the SMP so long," Sam continued, "and if that hurt you in any way, I'm more sorry than you could ever imagine."

"Don't be. I wouldn't change any of it for the world."

It was forgiveness, or something close to it. Sam averted his eyes from her face. He bit the inside of his cheek and tried to keep the oncoming tears at bay.

"Sammy?"

"You belong to the sea," he finally pushed out with a shaky breath, "and you never expected to fall for me on your journey back to it. I never thought I'd fall for you, let alone as hard as I did, and yet through everything, we've stayed by each other's side. That's gotta mean something. I would sail across a million waves and dangerous tides just to catch a single glimpse of you again. I wouldn't fear sea monsters or drowning, because in the end, you're the one who keeps me afloat, through thick and thin. Wherever you decide to go, I want to come too."

She still seemed a little puzzled, maybe even doubtful. "But what about the Badlands?"

"I don't care. I don't care about any of that, as long as we have each other."

He reached out and thumbed over the big scar running down her cheek and neck. They had fought for so much, and they won their long-awaited peace. Technoblade was right. They should be allowed to take some of it for themselves now.

She leaned into his touch, just as she always did, with her blue gaze trained on him and only him. He would go through all of it again just to feel as adored as they both were in that moment.

He'd do it all again, for this. For her. Forever.

Because it's more than just a sentence.

He took a deep breath to ground himself. This time, he wasn't going to chicken out. He still didn't have a ring, but that was alright. He had so much more than that to offer right then and now. He was handing over his last life, and everything that came with it.

"I promised myself two years ago that I'd love you forever. I want to spend that eternity with you, if you'll have me."

A smile crept onto her face. "Is this a proposal?"

"Would you say yes if it was?"

Puffy gave him a quick once-over, then stood on the tips of her hooves and pressed up against him, trying to get to eye level. "Let's see how well you fare on the high seas first, honey."

She could say and joke as much as she wanted, but her beautiful and sincere blue gaze as well as her beaming smile had already given him an answer – and it was an answer that made his heart soar.

She kissed him sweetly, and he knew he was finally home. *This* was his happy ending.

"Alright, I do have to confess that I've never sailed before. You're going to have to teach me the basics," he eventually whispered.

She laughed against his lips. "So I have your full permission to boss you around?"

"Aye aye, Captain."

Puffy gave him a gentle headbutt. "Now *this* is going to be fun." She brushed past him with a teasing nudge, inviting him to join her at the helm. "Michelle, sweetheart, look who's coming with us!"

Sam's heart tightened as he caught sight of the little piglin sulking on top of a barrel, but when she saw him, her eye lit up and her snout broke out into a smile of disbelief. She leapt down from her perch and ran into his open arms, squealing as he hauled her into the air and spun her around.

"Papa!" she cried, throwing her arms over his neck and hugging him tightly. "I knew you'd come back!"

He absolutely showered her in kisses, the last one landing on the velvet eye patch over her missing eye. "How could I ever leave my darling princess?" he cooed, tearing up once again.

Technoblade was right, once again – he would have regretted staying behind. He was split between two worlds, and he went where his heart told him he was needed the most.

The Badlands would thrive, Tubbo and Ranboo were grown up and happy together, and both the SMP and Tommy were at peace. He could move on to the greener pastures that needed him.

He didn't love any of them any less, no matter how close or how far away he was. Not even distance could break the bonds he had with them all.

A heavy gust of Northern wind suddenly blew across the ocean from the tundra. It filled the sails and the galleon lurched forward. Everyone lost their footing with cries of surprise and a colourful choice of insults.

Sam burst out laughing. He turned his eyes to the sky.

Nice one, Zephyrus.

If he looked very closely, he could almost see the shadow of the avian's wingspan against the canvas.

Sam turned back towards the harbour. Everyone was still there, crowding around the spot on the pier where the gangplank once stood. Their attention was all still focused on him, and his happiness.

They smiled and waved. Sam saluted them one last time.

He turned to look at Puffy, hunched over a map beside the wheel and expertly charting a course, her lips moving with silent murmurs. She wiped her brow, and a stiff breeze caressed a soft curl away from her cheek.

She looked up at him, and in her smile Sam could see their whole future ahead of them. He took her hand and lifted it up to his lips, holding it there tightly with a long, loving kiss.

One of the sailors yelled something from the deck below them, and the anchor was lifted. Finally, the last ship's tether to the SMP's shoreline was snapped. It was too late to go back, not that Sam would have anyway. He was here to stay, for good.

"So..." He lifted their daughter onto his shoulders. "Where to, Captain?"

"The Old World seems like a good place to start a new adventure," Puffy replied, abandoning her navigation tools.

She took off and placed her tricorn on top of Michelle's head, making her giggle. She then took out her spyglass and pointed it past Pandora's Vault, towards the thin line that cut the sea from the sky. The border of the unknown.

"But first, we'll aim for the horizon. The horizon, and then beyond."

Sam smiled. He couldn't wait.

Epilogue: Empty Chairs At Empty Tables

It had been thirty-two years exactly since the final battle, since Dream was finally gone for good.

Thirty-two years.

Eret was amazed at how time flew by so fast, and even more so by the fact that he was still alive to witness it. He had been part of some of the first people to settle in the realm, choosing to join the budding nation of L'Manberg in its first golden years.

That had been *forty years ago*.

Again, Eret could simply not believe it.

Fate and Time were strange forces, and they often liked working together. So little could happen in centuries, and so much could take place in less than a year.

And in the forty years since he had set foot on the SMP, lots had changed. Even now, he felt like he was living in a new world entirely.

A new generation came along as new generations did. While their presence made the nations thrive, it made Eret sad as well. Traditions were kept, but they were celebrating wars, victories and deaths that these new children knew little to nothing about, save for the stories they were told and the relics that lay around the land. Even then, the tales were growing taller and taller with each passing year.

Life and Death continued their vicious cycle, keeping and taking what they pleased. Veterans of the numerous wars passed away from sickness, exhaustion, stupid accidents or even old age, and their children were told to keep their legacy alive. Bless them, they absolutely tried, but without having lived fully in their parents' vicious timeline, their recounts differed greatly.

And now the childrens' children were being raised on myths rather than reality. History and its numerous actors became nothing more than phantoms.

King Eret had gone searching for many of them himself, adamant to locate the last living souls of a time long ago.

Not all the ghosts were completely gone yet. Many still walked the streets and led the nations.

Nikki's bakery was still up and running, although now the newer customers knew her as the sweet old lady who baked delicious cookies and accepted pretty flowers in exchange for a pastry, not as the fierce soldier who played a crucial part in many bloody battles. Eret visited her often and they spent many a day simply reminiscing over the good times. It was almost as if they were back within the peaceful safety of L'Manberg's old walls.

Bad, Skeppy, Ant and Velvet were still seated at the head of the Badlands, and Karl at Kinoko's. Callahan and Alyssa, two of the eight founders of the SMP, built themselves a little farm on part of L'Manberg's old territory and lived a simple life.

They never boasted about their pasts, and no one ever really asked them anymore. They were all still there, but growing older with each passing moment. Heirs were ready to take their places if the need came to be, but until then, they could only play the waiting game.

Others, alas, had already met their makers.

Sapnap lost his remaining lives in a tragic affair no one witnessed in the depths of the Kinoko forest. It was a tragedy unlike any other, a freak occurrence that had shocked everyone. The fireborn was found drowned in the depths of an old pond, a knife through his chest and a weighed down rope tied around his ankles. Only few knew what had really happened, and they were reluctant to talk about it to this day. Eret was one of them. The events that transpired afterwards were devastating and messy. Sapnap's death had torn Karl apart. He had lost his love and thus his sight once again. The whole of Kinoko Kingdom was shattered, and no amount of lavish eulogies, flower displays or memorial statues could ever console them.

Tubbo too had met a sudden and early end. A deadly plague swept through the realms and took many lives before healers finally clocked on. The young ram was one of the unfortunates. Ranboo had stayed beside him until the very end, and buried him beside Tommy. Their son Michael, now all grown up, became Snowchester's new leader, although Eret knew full well that the burden came with a heavy heart. He tried to offer help and advice, but the piglin refused, and the King of the SMP was obliged to simply

sit back and watch as yet another child shattered by grief was forced to painstakingly try to continue a parent's legacy.

Other phantoms simply left the land, leaving behind little to no trace of their presence.

Following Sapnap's death, George bid his final goodbyes and fled in the middle of the night. No one knew where to, and no one went looking for him. He wanted to be forgotten, and sure enough, people forgot him. Now the only remains of him were found in Eret's own shadow, as nothing but a passing memory of a fallen king who tried to take the Greater SMP's throne once upon a time.

The same thing happened with Quackity, who after leaving Las Nevadas to deteriorate as a ghost town of white washed marble walls, was never seen again.

Fundy's passion for redstone and the generous letters from Sam had paid off. He got accepted to the Cogchamp Academy and studied there many years. The SMP was certain he'd come back and put his new title of Grand Master to use in their realms, but it seemed he had other plans. Frequent letters to Ranboo and Nikki told his own tale of how he met a pretty arctic vixen in one of his classes. He fell in love, got married, and had a son of his own. With his new degree, a new family in another realm and bad memories associated with the SMP, he had seen no reason to return.

However, the most puzzling disappearance by far was that of a legendary warrior—Technoblade.

There had been many stressful times where King Eret would despise the throne he sat on, and one of these particularly depressing days had him suddenly wanting to seek the company of the SMP's most notorious anarchist. After all, the king and the warrior did seem to have formed a strange, passive friendship following the events of the Red Banquet.

Technoblade hadn't set foot on the mainland for over a decade since Puffy's ship left the Badlands. When Eret finally decided to brave the tundra years later, he found the cabins slowly crumbling, the roofs and rafters caved in by heavy snow. The kennels were empty. There was no sign of life to be found in the quaint settlement that was once known as the Antarctic Commune.

Ranboo had assured Eret that if Techno wasn't at home, then he was likely standing vigil at Philza's grave. The hybrid had told the king where to find it, and so he headed there instead. The ascent was covered in snow and ridiculously slippery, and when Eret got to the top, he was greeted by a surprising scene indeed.

There, kneeling down over Philza's frozen burial ground, was a stone statue of a piglin clad in a heavy winter's cloak and resting his forehead on the pommel of a familiar-looking battleaxe. The effigy was of an eerie likeness to the reclusive warrior it depicted, down to the finer details like the faint scar on the bridge of his snout, the small nick on one of his tusks and even the individual strands of fur. It was an incredible work of craftsmanship, if it was at all.

There was no way to truly know what happened to the Blade.

Had he been turned to stone by a higher power, forever allowing him to watch over the body of his best friend? Was the statue a headstone of some sort, made and left by a kind, anonymous soul to mark the final resting place of a legend who died as he lived, in secrecy? Or had it simply been made by the piglin himself as a final parting gift to the SMP before heading off on new adventures of his own?

Only one thing was certain: Technoblade was never seen or heard from again. The only memories of him were the fond murmurs of those who knew him well and his place among the storybooks of legend. Even then, Eret couldn't help but smile. Whatever happened, Technoblade would never truly die, as long as he was still remembered.

Memory was truly a powerful thing.

And finally, some of the SMP's phantoms of old had even manifested themselves through complete strangers and unexpected encounters.

A young man in his early twenties, still sporting the soft traces of boyhood, was brought before King Eret one day.

He had golden brown curls and a pair of ram's horns, as well as a laid back smile that made the monarch feel strangely at ease. He had a honey wood guitar strapped to his back, and yet he held himself with an air of nobility that the usual crowd of travelling bards did not have. No one knew his name nor where he and his ship came from, but there was a familiarity in him that starstruck the entire court nevertheless.

In that audience with the king, he made no threats of war, no monetary negotiations, and no pleas for over the top favours.

Instead, he told a story.

He clearly wasn't the most expert of storytellers, but he recounted every detail of his tale with a natural, musical ease that enchanted everyone in earshot.

He told them the story of a couple who had left the very same land they all stood on right now, with a plan to sail away towards new horizons. They spent a couple of years on the high seas, travelling from port to port, adventure to adventure. No matter how rough the tides were, how vicious the sea creatures or hostile enemy ships were or even how unforgiving the weather was, they persevered. They were fighters, and a notorious duo on the many oceans across the world. They used their reputation for good, helping rulers and poor men alike to recuperate stolen cargo and effects from dastardly pirate ships, chasing long forgotten myths for fun and research, and exploring a magnificent world that never seemed to end, even beyond the horizon.

The sea was at the heart of it all, as it had always been since the very beginning. After calling them both, it gave them a couple of good years or so on its waters before letting them leave again, if they wanted to – and they did.

They settled down and built a life together on land, as unexpected as their predicament had seemed. Vows and rings were exchanged. Their son was born two years afterwards. He grew up to become the very same young man who was currently standing at the foot of King Eret's throne.

They led a relatively peaceful life, he continued to tell the court, and fought their remaining demons from times long gone when they happened to rear their heads. They were happy, until Lady Death finally paid them a visit.

His father, a brave and brilliant man with a heart of gold went first, cut down in an unexpected confrontation gone awry. His mother, a once-legendary captain with eyes the colour of the bright and clear waters of the sea, mourned for years on end until she too succumbed to the horrors of war.

He told the king of his older sister too, who was not of his own blood but who shared their mother's love for the ocean and their father's ingenuity for all things mechanical. He loved her dearly, and trusted her with everything.

Including his own throne while he travelled.

The son's last stop on his journey was the SMP. He wanted to check if the legends he had been told were true, and that was how he came to bow before King Eret that day.

He asked only for one thing from the monarch – the opportunity to see the first lands his parents had devoted their lives to.

Eret insisted on taking him around himself.

Hazel-green eyes, still bright with the fairytales and childhood stories not yet completely passed by, stared with wonder at every inch of the realm, from the tallest tower to the smallest blade of grass. The questions he asked were relentless, but the monarch answered patiently. Every answer that confirmed a myth made the visitor smile an infectious amount. Faint freckles dappled his cheeks, glinting a pale green when caught by the sun.

It hurt part of Eret to look at him, but his pain was overruled by the soft blanket of reassurance he brought along with him.

The life Sam and Puffy had led wasn't perhaps a perfect paradise, as the ends to their stories had clearly shown, but it was a life nonetheless. A last life that they had chosen to spend together until the end.

That night, Eret snuck out of the palace alone and lay a single rose outside the entrance to Pandora's Vault. Another story had reached its end.

But most importantly, some phantoms were kept safely in a large, temple-like building in the heart of the SMP. The last real crumbs of the SMP's history were held within Eret's museum.

The museum was a project that the king had been working on for years on end to perfect. The idea came to him a little after L'Manberg had gained its independence, and had opened to the people for the first time some twenty years ago now.

While most of the plans had been his own, he hadn't done it alone. Ranboo's help had been crucial, as well as Karl's generous and numerous donations of old books and historical knowledge so intricate that Eret was scared to question where he had even found it all out. And of course, the people that wanted to help did by bringing small donations that they deemed insignificant, but that Eret's eyes lit up as if they were offering him cartloads of gems. Scraps of uniforms, rusting weapons, mouse-eaten notes and letters – the king put them all under glass and safely where they belonged.

The artists he paid were now hired for something more magnificent than simple portraits. Full blown fresques and mural maps lined the walls, depicting the legendary moments and places that made the SMP what it was today. Some of those particular places were even recreated by sculptors and engineers, breathing new life into the Final Control Room, Wilbur Soot's infamous button room and even the Egg's lair. Flags new and old fluttered at every corner.

King Eret crammed it all in until the walls were practically bursting. When they finally did, he dug downwards into the earth and piled up even more.

The museum was ever growing, ever expanding to the rhythm of the realms it paid homage to. It was never truly completed, as History would never truly be over.

When the doors were first opened, King Eret was often solicited for other things than leadership. Members of the new generation would come to him when they stumbled upon an overgrown grave while exploring the old ruined watchtower overlooking L'Manberg's crater, or when a brief visit to the White Mansion would leave them with the regal green and black eyes of an oil painting imprinted on their minds. They had questions, and the king happily answered them by guiding them through History's mausoleum.

If no one else remembered the real events, his timeless shrine most definitely would. The museum was the king's lasting legacy. Everything that was in there, every story told through the artifacts and the paintings, Eret had lived through. He was always there, even if it was just as a figure in the background. He was a part of it all, even if the role he played was perhaps not always one that put him in a good light.

Sometimes, he would go there on his own and simply let himself drown in the past with all its heartache and tears of joy. Memories danced along with the flickering lights and swaying flags, and he'd let himself get carried away by the current.

But today was a little different. Thirty years or so since Dream's defeat had finally dawned on him, and he wanted to go back to where things all began.

The recreation Camarvan was the first exhibit to be completed. It was displayed proudly in the middle of the first floor, underneath the magnificent glass dome that made up the roof.

At first glance, it was a little silly. The Camarvan, the place where L'Manberg had truly been founded, was modeled after a hotdog van from the Old World's mechanical history. It had four wheels that never took it anywhere and a comically large sausage on the roof. It was a staple of Wilbur and Tommy's ridiculous sense of humour, but it did make everyone smile whenever they passed it by.

It definitely made Eret grin, and it used to be one of his favourite places to be back in the beginning of L'Manberg. Back when he was considered a friend and fellow founder. Back before he had betrayed them all for a throne.

At the time, he considered his actions justified and non-consequential. He had proven to be a good and fair ruler, and L'Manberg had essentially destroyed itself on its own through actions and events unrelated to him. He had merely foreseen the hassle the spirited, headstrong young nation would go through and had tried to get them all to see that.

Yet now, with sixty years now upon him, no heir to the throne of the Greater SMP and a list of dear friends that seemed to dwindle faster than ever, Eret had been given the chance to mull over his actions and brash decisions of his youth. Every year, as commemorations after commemorations were celebrated, he sat in the solitude of his empty throne room and reflected.

This year, he finally built up the courage to face his own phantoms.

Eret had taken upon himself to recreate every exhibit to perfection, and the Camarvan was no exception. Even years after the fact, every single detail was engraved in his mind like an epitaph on a headstone. He made sure everything was perfect, from the small crack in one of the windows from Tubbo's carelessness to the slanted axle between the two front wheels, a fault of creation that Wilbur insisted gave the van "character".

The accuracy, previously a blessing of his memory, was now a curse. As soon as Eret stepped inside it, he was flooded by hauntings of a time long gone.

It wasn't the real Camarvan, and yet the sadness was still just as heavy as if it had been. The crushing weight of guilt and grief mixed together hung over his old, stooped shoulders like layers of iron chains.

He shuffled a little further in and simply stared. The inside was as it had always been, slightly cramped, but homely. Brewing stands were still stacked in a corner. The chairs were pulled up to the tables and left askew, as if a meeting had ended in a hurry. Sunlight filtered through the grimy glass windows and made the dust particles sparkle like a golden shower.

It was beautiful, and it was tragic.

Empty chairs at empty tables, where his friends would sit no more.

But he would.

He rested his exhausted, aching body on the chair furthest to the left, the chair that used to be his. Immediately, grief swallowed him whole, and he looked around him. He

was alone. The Camarvan was empty. His friends that once made it feel so alive were dead and gone.

He lay his hand on the table, almost nervously. This was the table where they had first talked of their thoughts of revolution and the enticing flames of war. They shared drinks here, they created friendships and a whole nation that had a lasting impact for years to come.

Now they were dead, and the traitor among them was the only one left. For a nation whose greatest trait was said to be the fierce loyalty of its people, it was ironic.

A sad irony, if Eret was being honest.

He could feel countless eyes on him, judgemental spirits watching him from the windows and rising from every shadow cast along the floor. His guilt only grew.

"My friends..." he began, not knowing how many there were. "My friends, forgive me that I'm here and you are gone. None of us deserved what we got. Our places should have been switched."

That was all he could say. He couldn't go on and grovel to their memory. They most likely didn't care anymore. He didn't know or understand what their sacrifices were for, and he wouldn't claim to do so either. He just knew what he knew, and that was that Fate was cruel.

He was alive, and they were not. All three of his lives were still intact, and would remain so until age would finally take them all in one fell swoop. Until then, he was pretty sure he had a while yet.

The villain was still here, and the heroes were *gone*. He was the last true tie to L'Manberg, and he was its traitor.

The realization made him cry, and in the emptiness of the Camarvan, he broke down. He cried to the memory of Wilbur's words and music, Tommy's jokes and quips, Tubbo's unwavering kindness and determination. He wept for the souls lost in his treacherous scheme and all those who had died in the years afterwards. He shed tears for all those scarred by his own fault and that of Dream's. He cried at the thought of the throne he simply didn't deserve.

He wasn't worthy of anything else than a painful, final death, something to make him pay for everything he had done.

A simple sorry would never, ever be enough.

"Eret?"

The voice made him raise his head. The king saw a tall, lanky figure in the doorway.

He almost started sobbing again, this time for Ranboo. Losing Tubbo had rendered him utterly inconsolable for years, and maybe if Eret hadn't devised the plot to strip him of his first life during his betrayal of L'Manberg, maybe he would have still been alive today, even if it was on a single life and borrowed time, and—

"Are you alright?"

Even now, as the hybrid had just crossed over the half a century mark, the grief had carved him into a frail being that had only just started to regain his old spark. He too didn't deserve any of the horrors that had happened to him.

King Eret wiped his eyes and sniffed. "I'm fine," he whispered.

Ranboo offered the monarch his hand, and Eret took it as he was helped out of the van.

"They've started setting up the fireworks for tonight," his advisor told him, "and the people want you to give a speech."

Eret's mouth twitched into a small smile. "Can't you do it for me?"

"Come on now, you know that I hate public speaking."

"I suppose you're right, but I just don't feel up to it."

"Are you tired?"

"I feel like I always am, nowadays."

"Why are you here? Alone, I mean."

The monarch sighed. "Trying to appease the dead, but I'm afraid it's not working."

At least, that was what he thought.

A breeze suddenly blew past him, making the grey hairs on his head dance against his forehead and his tear-soaked cheeks dry in sticky cold streams.

He froze where he stood, startled, and looked all around them. The museum's grand doors were closed. There were no footsteps save for their own, that had stopped. They were alone.

Alone, except for ghosts long gone.

Even Ranboo's pointed ears seemed to twitch at the change in their surroundings. "Did you feel that?" he asked him.

He did. Oh gods, did Eret feel *that*!

It was as if someone – three someones, in fact, with many more watching on in humoured silence – had lifted something heavy off his shoulders. For the first time in decades, his chains of culpability were nowhere to be found.

Eret didn't know what was happening, until he felt the phantom gazes on him again. This time, they were smiling, and the king did so with them.

"They're here," he whispered, lifting his eyes to the sky.

"Who?"

"Everyone."

He inhaled the sweet new air around him and laughed, high and loudly. His old, frail lungs complained and his tired eyes watered, but he didn't care.

They forgave him. They *forgave* him.

And if he listened very closely, he could even hear them sing, raising a glass to a hope that was finally and fully restored.

It was beautiful, and it was everything.

THE END

Final author's note in the following chapter entry <3

Parting Thoughts: Some Final Words From The Author

(Thank you for the very accurate meme, [WolfyDoesThings in a box](#) <3)

And to think this whole thing started because I saw a really cool ruby ring in a shop.

I was browsing a medieval fantasy shop in a town not far from where I live with a friend, Purple, when we happened upon the aforementioned cool little bit of jewelry. Deep in our Dream SMP phase at that point, we spent almost half an hour inventing random lore around it and who would wear it, including potential Egg lore. Then, we started going around and looking at the rest, namely weapons and the like, and ended up weaving together some loose, random storylines.

We never really thought they'd lead anywhere – it was just some fun, what-if banter.

Soon after, the canon Dream SMP lore killed Tommy. Naturally, I wrote three short stories as a sort of tribute.

And then that motherfucker got revived in less than two days.

Needless to say, I didn't agree with that. I wanted to see the characters around Tommy suffer a little more – and by characters, I mean Sam specifically.

So, fuelled by my desire to write a strongly-worded complaint letter to the lore and with a vague outline made up of a few random ideas me and Purple came up with on a whim, I wrote and published the first chapter of "Red Phantom" on March 20th 2021.

Following that, as you can probably see from the current page and word count, all hell broke loose. Once again, I was foolishly throwing myself into a huge project in the middle of some of the toughest school years here in France with essays, finals, and endless theater gigs.

(Am I ever going to learn from my mistakes? No, absolutely not.)

Still, I'm inclined to say that it paid off in the end.

I've had the opportunity to improve my writing and storytelling, keep myself immersed in the SMP even when lore ran dry for months on end, and I met some wonderful people who started off as readers and became my friends.

You know who you are, and I thank you all.

In the year and a half (almost exactly) that it took to complete this book, a lot happened, in my life and in that of others. The main thing I will refer to however in this time is Technoblade's cancer diagnosis, and subsequent tragic passing.

It hit everyone hard, and not just in the Minecraft community. The news was everywhere, even here in France, and for a long time too.

I quite honestly don't think I've ever been affected that hard by someone's death, and I don't know why. Maybe it's because by pouring thousands of words into his character, I've grown closer to him, in a way. I don't know, and I don't think I ever will. I re-read "Red Phantom" in the days that followed the news, just for the sake of it. I didn't go through it as the author or the editor, but rather as a reader and a fan who just wanted to take their mind off things.

Technoblade never dies, and in the future, if this fanfiction's only fame or reputation is being a block among millions keeping that promise alive, I'd be happy.

Writing "Red Phantom" helped me during darker times, and I know it helped others too, even if it was just as a distraction.

And you guys seem to appreciate and like it for that? Some of you even a lot?

I mean, your comments already are made of sweetness and/or golden comedy, I've been recommended to complete strangers, I've inspired authors and bits and pieces in their different fics, and I've even received fanart?!

I mean, *hello?! Fanart!*

I look at them every day because y'all are amazing. Whether you're a regular commenter, a lurker, or even someone who just read the first two words and went "Yep, I'll read this later" and simply forgot about it, I love you all. You and your support mean so much to me, and I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you guys for everything.

As for the future of this fic and my writing in general... well...

Needless to say, I'm still going to be writing and uploading things, mainly on Quotev but also on my AO3 account. My writing career is definitely not going to stop anytime soon.

Thank you all, for everything. You're the best, and I would do it all again in a heartbeat. Just... thank you. None of this would have ever been possible without your love and support. I love you all, and I'll see you on the flip side, my friends.

Sincerely,

Iphiko

White Skies

After careful consideration, a public survey and effective persuasion from friends, I have finally decided to write the sequel to "Red Phantom"—"White Skies".

Although the RP epilogue has mentioned and summarized certain events already, I've still always wanted to write it fully and add more to it all in order to paint a detailed picture. If it's not obvious enough already, I have severe attachment issues to RP, as I've noticed some other readers have too.

I see you, you know who you are.

Consider this an optional sequel, then. It's there if you want to read about the events mentioned in the original epilogue (and even more that weren't), and wrap up some stories that might have been left ambiguous or ended as somewhat of a footnote in RP.

Therefore, without further ado, here it is.

Link: [White Skies](#)

White Skies

Half a decade has passed since Dream's defeat and with no common enemy on the horizon, many of the SMP's notorious fighters have since parted ways with one another and their realms.

*It was beautiful, it was everything, and it was meant to stay that way—right?
Unfortunately, blood red phantoms still ceaselessly haunt many, even as they move on to
seemingly greener pastures.*

*Ranboo tries desperately to fit into his new role among King Eret's ranks and keep up the
numerous promises he's made over the years, all while witnessing peace crack and
crumble before his very eyes once again. Sam is flung back into a world he thought he had
escaped for good, this time with the daunting realization that he's shackling people he
loves down with him, and a legend once thought to have evaporated into thin air makes a
startling return.*
